REIMAGINING LATINIDAD IN MEXICAN-AMERICAN BIOPICS

A Dissertation

by

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Submitted to the Office of Graduate and Professional Studies of
Texas A&M University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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August 2019

Major Subject: Hispanic Studies

ABSTRACT

This study examines how Mexican-American identity has been performed in six biographical films produced by the North American film industry from the 1980s to 2015. The biographical films examined in this study include *La Bamba (1987), Stand and Deliver (1988), Selena (1997), César Chávez (2014), Spare Parts (2015),* and *McFarland, USA (2015).* The study of Mexican-American identity is facilitated through an exploration of several contours of a film, such as an imaginary perception of Mexican-Americanness, casting for the roles of the lead characters, and either incorporation of previous stereotypes or a reconfiguration of Mexican-American images. While Mexican-Americanness has been examined through the lens of stereotypical roles in biopics, this dissertation uses filmography, social and cultural history, and questions of cultural authenticity to explore the performance of Mexican-Americanness in biographical films.

This study explores the site of intersection between biographical films and the portrayal of Mexican-Americans. Expanding on earlier scholarly studies of biopics as well as studies of Mexican-American identity in film, this investigation draws on the ways that Mexican-American identity reflects social and political trends of the time periods in which they are produced, filmic representations of Mexican-Americans, and interpretations of how certain scenes function as sites of identity formation. Various elements combine in order to construct the concept of Mexican-Americanness as performance in the film industry, such as Spanish language elements, a reclamation of a lost heritage, and historical distortions with the end goal of entertaining an audience.

Ultimately, this study observes that within the past few decades, the imaginary concept of Latina/o identity is shifting to accurately reflect the authentic nature of Latina/o identity while acknowledging that remnants of stereotypes persist due to the demands of popular culture. It concludes that the Mexican-American biopics produced in the 1980s and 1990s exhibit themes more closely aligned with the identity themes of the Chicano Movement while biopics produced in the 2010s reflect themes faced by Mexican-Americans in a xenophobic post-September 11 nation. The notion of Mexican-American performance in biopics echoes the complicated matrix of political and social trends of society.

DEDICATION

To my parents

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my committee chair, Dr. Richard Curry, and my committee members, Dr. Felipe Hinojosa, Dr. Alain Lawo-Sukam, and Dr. Stephen Miller, for their leadership and direction throughout the course of this study.

Thanks also to my friends and colleagues and the department faculty and staff for making my time at Texas A&M University a memorable experience. I would especially like to thank Christina Lake, Ines D. Golsan, Amanda PG, Amelia Uribe-Guajardo, Ariana Broumand, and Dr. Sara Alpern.

To my siblings, Leroy, Blanca, and Jorge, you have invested in me emotionally and financially throughout the years. I would not be where I am today without you all.

Lastly, thanks to my parents for their unconditional love and for coming to this country so I would have the opportunity to pursue my Ph.D.

CONTRIBUTORS AND FUNDING SOURCES

Contributors

This work was supervised by a dissertation committee consisting of Professors Rick Curry, Alain Lawo-Sukam, Stephen Miller, and Professor Felipe Hinojosa of the Department of History. All work for the dissertation was completed independently by the student.

Funding Sources

Graduate study was supported by a teaching assistantship from Texas A&M University and a Lechner Graduate Award from the College of Liberal Arts.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

In the past two decades, the genre of biographical film has blossomed in the North American film industry. Along with this subgenre in the film industry, more Latina/o[1] oriented films are emerging as well, and they are embedding themselves within the realm of United States popular culture. Such a phenomenon reflects a proliferating interest in the portrayal of Latina/o lives by Hollywood and independent film industry, demonstrating the importance of Latina/os as an integral demographic in North America. I define Hollywood as the conventional film industry in the United States and the independent film industry as any film-producing entity that falls outside of this category.

An interest in Latina/o performers became more pronounced in the late 1990s than in previous decades. During this decade that, according to scholar Deborah Parédez, has been designated as the *Latina/o Boom*, Jennifer López, Ricky Martin, and Shakira, among others, crossed over into mainstream popular culture and became household names. After Jennifer López starred in the *Selena* (1997) biopic, she launched a successful movie and music career. López, along with others of Latina/o descent, paved the way for present-day Latina/o stars.

This study focuses on the production of biographical films in recent years, from 1980-2015. Contemporarily, films such as *César Chávez* (2014), *McFarland, USA* (2015) and *Spare Parts* (2015) have been produced by the North American movie industry, establishing the awareness of Latina/os as a crucial demographic of the cultural fabric of the United States. The

[1] Acknowledging that scholarly debate exists concerning this term and identity politics, I have opted for the usage of "Latina/o" rather than "Latinx" because I do not specifically examine gender fluidity in this study. The term "Latina/o" is used to refer to all people in Latin America, including people from Brazil while the term "Hispanic" is the U.S. government-created term to account for Spanish-speaking populations in the United States. I use "Latina/o" and "Hispanic" interchangeably throughout my study.

importance of a Latina/o presence has influenced the box office success of Latino-centric[2] biopics. In fact, within the U.S. movie industry, *La Bamba* (1987) and *Selena* (1997) are among the highest grossing biopics of all time.

An increasing interest in the portrayal of Mexican-Americans demonstrates the need to make this continuously growing ethnic community visible or at least portrayed in a multivalent manner within mainstream culture. Mexican-Americans are the largest, most prominent of U.S. Latina/os, so an examination of their representations in film is essential to any discussion of Latina/o image crafting. Until the 2000s and 2010s, cinematic portrayals of Latina/os did not take into account the diverse nature of Latina/o identity issues, which has contributed to a limited portrayal of Mexican-Americanness. Latina/o populations in the United States have been portrayed in such a way that has erased their idiosyncrasies. Instead of reflecting authenticity[3], filmmakers have homogenized Latina/os by recurring to an imaginary state of Mexican-Americanness instead of portraying its heterogeneous reality. Often, the heterogeneity of Latina/os is reduced to recurring stereotypes on the screen, such as the Latin lover, the bandit, the lazy Mexican, and the Latina/o gang member, according to scholar Charles Ramírez-Berg.

Scholarship on Latina/o representation, then, needs to examine emerging trends in the portrayal of Mexican-Americanness in the North American film industry. This study examines how the biographical films *La Bamba* (1987), *Selena* (1997), *César Chávez* (2014), *Spare Parts* (2015), and *McFarland, USA* (2015) portray Mexican-American performance of ethnicity, focusing on the ways in which new Latina/o portrayals occur to reflect the diversity of Mexican-

[2] I define "Latino-centric" as a genre in which themes specific to Latina/os play a central role in the biopic.
[3] I define "authenticity" as the act of illustrating the complexities of ethnic identity without altering identity for the sake of audience entertainment.

Americanness better, while also touching on the ways in which stereotypes continue to prevail in Hollywood and independent films.

Literature Review

Scholarship on Latina/o representation trends in Hollywood and independent film industries shows a change over time from the 1980s to the present day. During the 1980s, the focus of the studies centered on stereotypical Mexican-American sketches. Within the past two decades, however, studies have focused on more specific cinematic aspects, such as the casting of actors as part of the process of representing Mexican-American authenticity on the silver screen.

In the 1980s, scholarship on the depiction of Mexican-Americans focused more on the origins of Mexican-American stereotypes in film and how such depictions had evolved up to this decade. Arthur Pettit in *Image of the Mexican American in Fiction and Film* (1980) and Frank Javier García Berumen in *The Mexican-American/Hispanic Image in American Film* (1985) paid particular attention to Latina/o stereotypes and invisibility. In Pettit's study, Latina/o character portrayals in Westerns were documented for the first time in the study of the cinema. He demonstrated that a pattern of constructing Latina/os as "Others" had been established as opposed to their White counterparts. In consonance with this idea, Berumen argues that the portrayal of Mexican-Americans and other Latina/os is relegated to damaging stereotypes in Hollywood films. He explains that Latina/o images appear a certain way in film, and he argues that a distorted understanding of history has contributed to the image making of Latina/os. By identifying the genesis in the trends of Latina/o portrayals as they belong to the category of the Other, a dialogue began about how this representation was created and reinforced throughout the years.

Charles Ramírez-Berg (2002) elaborated on previous scholarship mentioned above of Mexican-American stereotypes by tracing their manifestations to villainous depictions of Mexicans during the Mexican Revolution. By explaining that the construction of Latina/os in Hollywood film existed in relation to a perceived Anglo-centric[4] superiority during this time, he identified the following representations of Mexican-Americans: the bandit, the male buffoon, the harlot, the Latin lover, the female clown, and the dark lady. This process of confining Mexican-Americans to such limited representations can be traced back to the notion of Manifest Destiny, a term first widely implemented in the 19th century to express American virtue and westward expansion to the Pacific. As a threat to this expansion, Mexican-Americans were perceived as villainous and a hindrance to this westward geographic growth. Mexicans, as well as people of Spanish descent, already resided in the Southwestern region of the United States. Expansion entailed the displacement of Mexican people and erasure of their culture. The stereotypes in this study arguably originate from this notion of Manifest Destiny. The notion of Mexicans as villains paved the way for the appearance of the six Mexican-American stereotypical portrayals identified by Ramírez-Berg in the 20th-century films of his study. This process of such image sketching was a way to invalidate Latina/os, especially Mexican-Americans on a quest for westward expansion.

Other researchers within the past decade have expanded on these earlier studies of Latina/os in film by studying the relationship between racialization and its connection to Latina/o images. Discourses in Hollywood have helped craft which phenotypic traits are attributed to Latina/os, consequently reinforcing the notion of a White and non-White binary. For example, Mary C. Beltrán (2009) in *Latina/o Stars in U.S. Eyes* observes that certain body ideals

[4] I define "Anglo-centric" as a genre in which themes specific to Anglos play a central role in the biopic.

contributed to the success of a Latina/o actor to play particular roles. The more Latina/o actors embodied White beauty and body ideals, the less likely they were of being cast in Latina/os roles. The notion of which traits represent the Latino look, then, has steered Hollywood expectations. The Latino typically, from a traditional Hollywood perspective, appears as brown-faced and with indigenous features.

Scholar Angharad Valdivia has focused on self-representation of Latina/o hypervisibility as an emerging trend in Hollywood. Valdivia (2009) explains that in the 1980s, which has been referred to as the "Decade of the Hispanic" within marketing and government entities, became an important time for Latina/o visibility in popular culture. Certain films, such as Luis Váldez's *La Bamba* (1987) and Ramon Menendez's *Stand and Deliver* (1988), represented Latino/as as protagonists with dignity. Ritchie Valens' life story, as well as Jaime Escalante's, became embedded in the history of United States culture as a result of these biographical films. While the life of Valens highlighted the image of a trailblazing Mexican-American musician, the life of Jaime Escalante entered the mainstream discussion of popular culture within the United States. The biographies of these Latinos had been virtually unknown prior to this point in time, but as a result of these films, they entered academic and non-academic discussions within the United States. As Latina/o depictions began to shift during this decade, Latino/a actors and film protagonists joined mainstream Hollywood, adding a different dimension of Latinness that had not previously been unveiled for the public.

In addition to the scholarship that exists concerning Latina/o portrayals on the Hollywood screen, other scholars have studied aspects of the biographical film in recent decades. Few studies have examined the biopic in an in-depth fashion, and fewer yet have examined the specificities of the female biopic. George F. Custen's (1993) study *Bio/Pics: How Hollywood*

Constructed History observes biographical patterns manifested in Hollywood during the studio era, starting in 1927 and ending in 1960. This investigation explains the origins of the influence that Hollywood has exerted on its audience. A persuasive tool that shapes public memory, which for the sake of this study, is defined as the influence of past perceptions on present-day mental images. Constituting a part in this concept of public memory, the "Hollywood biographical film created and still creates public history by declaring, through production and distribution, which lives are acceptable subjects" (12). In consonance with this idea, this study investigates the characteristics that have made Ritchie Valens, Selena Quintanilla, César Chávez, Jaime Escalante, the McFarland cross country team, and members of a Latino robotics club "acceptable subjects" in *La Bamba, Selena, César Chávez, Stand and Deliver, McFarland, USA*; and *Spare Parts*, respectively.

I use George Custen's definition of the biopic in my analysis. He defines a biographical film as "one that depicts the life of a person, past or present" (5). Any biographical film has its antecedents in other media before it comes to fruition and is displayed on the big screen. Movies containing recreations from the past are the earliest genres of the cinema (5). With each generation, the definition of the biographical films seems to change not because the genre itself is changed but because "certain careers and types of people become the prime focus of public curiosity in each generation" (Custen 7).

Although the studies mentioned previously in this section provide a substantive understanding of the biopic, they do not include in-depth analyses of theatrically released Mexican-American biofilms. In this dissertation, I aim to continue the dialogue of identity politics as it pertains to Mexican-Americans, the largest Latina/o subpopulation residing in the United States, contrasting the Hollywood movie industry with the independent one, by studying

how Latina/o biographical films help to contest the White Hollywood hierarchies that have been formed by an imagined state of Latinness in the United States and also a contrasting viewpoint with the past.

Theoretical Framework

Depictions of Hispanics have remained static over time, namely in Hollywood film productions from the turn of the century to the 1980s. Mexican-Americans first appeared as bandits in Western films such as *Tony the Greaser* (1914) and *Guns and Greasers* (1918). For decades to follow, the image of the Mexican as the villain continued not only in Western films but in other movie genres as well. In the 1980s to 2015, more varied models of Mexican-Americans appeared on the silver screen and the result is a better representation of the growing population of Mexican-Americans in the United States. Nevertheless, stereotypes and other misrepresentations continue to prevail in the world of films. From repeated stereotypes like that of the Latin lover and misrepresentations of Hispanics by defaulting to salsa music in order to musically represent them, images of Mexican-Americans in film still fall short of a revision that takes their true heterogeneity into account.

This study focuses on how Mexican-Americanness within *Latinidad* has been constructed in six biographical films in some Hollywood industry films, as well as in an independent film. Angharad Valdivia defines *Latinidad*, which is a term interchangeably used with its English equivalent of Latinness, as "the state or experience of becoming Latina/o or the assignment of Latina/o traits to people, culture, and habits (11). This study explores this "aura" of *Latinidad* as it is transmitted through various techniques, such as the process of casting of actors, musical selections, and performances of actors cast for the roles of the protagonists. Valdivia's definition will be used in this study, given the importance of the

complexities of ethnic identity construction. Furthermore, this study considers the role of bilingual and bicultural spectators in the United States.

Latinidad becomes apparent in numerous ways in the biopics of this study. Instead of assigning essentialist qualities to the term, competing discourses exist in order to explain its manifestation. In this study, Elana Levine's stance in reference to the Latina/o audience in the United States is taken into account in describing the way the final product is formed by one audience. She describes spectatorship as "bilingual and bicultural, as a stabilized hybrid of ethnic past and U.S. present" (35). Levine observes that film studios recognize a bilingual and bicultural spectatorship. A recognition of this type of identity influences the final product of the film. For example, protagonists in the selected biographical films communicate in English and Spanish without the use of captions. The omission of translation from one language to another signifies the reformulation of a new identity because the identity is no longer viewed through the eyes of a white audience. Instead, it presumes a bilingual spectatorship rather than a monolingual one. Another way the theoretical framework of *Latinidad* is applied is by examining the ways in which the North American film industry has relegated Latina/os to restrictive stereotypes on the screen by showing this phenomenon as homogenized. Lastly, *Latinidad* informs my interpretation of cinematic elements in the selected biopics of this study. Specifically, the amalgamation of auditory and visual elements that construct Latina/o identity in film are analyzed from the perspective of whether or not they are authentically Mexican-American or not.

The modern-day depiction of Mexican-Americans stems from a complicated history of Western culture versus Eastern culture, how this ideology was transmitted to colonialism in the United States, and finally how it trickled down to the racialization of Mexican-Americans in the

Southwest. Edward Said's theory of "otherness" is used throughout this study. His theory of examining orientalism as being equivalent to an outsider status functions as a pretext for colonialism in the United States. First, Edward Said explains how Oriental culture has been assigned an inferior status through cultural discourse that prizes the West. He explains how the East is perceived as being the "Other" through the West's manipulation of knowledge. Through an examination of his own culture as a Palestinian, Said describes the way that Europe was accorded a superior status: **"**So far as the West was concerned during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, an assumption had been made that the Orient and everything in it was, if not patently inferior to, then in need of corrective study by the West" (40).

The Orient, then existed, as the Other and deficient according to the constituents of the West. People from the East were viewed as deficient or lacking status compared to their Western counterparts. Said's concept of the "Other" is used in this study to frame the status of subordinate counterparts ascribed to Mexican-Americans in the biopics of this study.

Gloria Anzaldúa's theory of the *new mestiza consciousness* is deployed to explain the heterogeneity of Mexican-American identity in the biopics of this study. In reference to border identity, Gloria Anzaldúa encourages the rejection of binaries when describing border identity. In describing her concept of the *new mestiza consciousness*, she affirms the following:

> La mestiza constantly has to shift out of habitual formations: from convergent thinking, analytical reasoning that tends to use rationality to move toward a single goal (a Western mode), to divergent thinking, characterized by movement away from set patterns and goals and toward a more whole perspective, one that includes rather than excludes. The new mestiza copes by developing a tolerance for ambiguity...She operates in a

> pluralistic mode--nothing is thrust out, the good the bad and the ugly, nothing rejected, nothing abandoned. (101)

Rather than Mexican-Americans consisting of a mix of two cultures, their identities are forged by taking into account disparate elements, which together comprise a "new, third kind" of culture. The manifestation of this theory is explored in the border biopics of this study, keeping in mind the elements that contribute to shaping the image of the Mexican-American.

Furthermore, this study employs Benedict Anderson's notion of *imagined political communities* as it relates to the construction of Mexican-American identity by non-Mexican-Americans. He explains national identity as being invented because different members of society cannot fully understand their counterparts but will instead create an imagined sense of their identities. Anderson's definition of this notion is quoted at length here:

> I propose the following definition of the nation: it is an imagined political community-and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign. It is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion... Communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined. (49)

In other words, nationhood is socially-constructed by those in power, or Anglos, who cannot ever fully understand the disempowered. As it pertains to this study, Latina/o and non-Latina/o filmmakers alike contribute to the process of an imagined sense of Mexican-Americanness. This concept is the figment of an imagined state of ethnicity as it is perceived and performed by members outside of the ethnicity.

The intersectionality of gender and *Latinidad* in the biopics *Selena* and *César Chávez* will be examined. In order to frame and truly understand the role that gender plays in these biopics, gender theory will be used to illuminate the ways in which Selena redefines womanhood as a Latina on the Hollywood screen. In *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Judith Butler theorizes gender through the concept of *performativity*. In reference to this term, she points out that "gender proves to be performance--that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this sense, gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to pre-exist the deed" (25). This notion of Butler's *performativity* has cross-discipline value and will be applied accordingly to the formation of identity in this study. Ethnic identity, like gender, is performed in the biographical films of this study. Mexican-American identity has previously appeared in such a way that its on-screen interpretation, whether authentic or artificial, has been performed and re-performed.

The reconstruction of a culturally-encoded gender is performed and re-performed in two of the biopics chosen for this study, *Selena* and *César Chávez.* The most prominent example appears in Selena; she challenges patriarchal norms by performing a gender different from what "Hollywood" or her own heritage would prescribe for her. In the gender role shifting *Selena* biopic, for example, the protagonist transformed femininity by becoming a successful female in a traditionally male-dominated musical genre. Furthermore, in addition to reconfiguring traditional passive gender roles of women, Jennifer López, in her portrayal of Selena, performs Mexican-Americanness.

This study, thus, examines this pluralistic modus operandi in the chosen biopics. Instead of the portrayal of six stereotypes on the screen identified by Charles Ramírez- Berg, possible new paradigms are created in these biopics: record-breaking musicians, a policy-changing

activist, college-bound inner-city Latina/os, and record-setting athletes. Regardless of the fact that *Latinidad* is portrayed in a heterogeneous manner, remnants of Latina/o stereotypes persist.

In addition to *Latinidad* and gender studies, this study draws upon a central theoretical framework from the field of Media Studies. First, Andrew Sarris' concept of *auteur theory* is employed pertaining to the final product of the cinematic production. According to Sarris, the director wields the greatest influence in film authorship (562). The directors in the selected biographical films inserted a specific vision in the finalization of the cinematic artwork and thus determined how *Latinidad* was portrayed on the screen.

The theories mentioned here are used to contextualize Mexican-American identity and the filmmaking process. In sum, this study highlights different ways that being Latina/o appears in six biopics: the empowered Latina musician in *Selena*, the intellectualized Latina/o in *Stand and Deliver* and *Spare Parts*; the "athleticized" Latina/os in *McFarland, USA*; the intellectualized policy-changing protagonist in the eponymous *César Chávez*, and the role of Ritchie Valens in establishing Latinos/as as a legitimate audience in the music industry of the United States.

The biographical films in the chapters of this dissertation are presented thematically. The biopics in the second chapter are musically-centered films of iconic Mexican-American singers, the eponymous biopic in the third chapter focuses on César Chávez, and the biopics in the fourth chapter focus on Mexican-Americans in a school setting, pre- and post- September 11.

Chapter 2 defines the parameters of stereotypical sketches of *Latinidad* as it has appeared historically in Hollywood through the eyes of White Anglo Saxon Protestants. There are six stereotypes of Latina/os as set forth by Charles Ramírez-Berg, as an analysis of how *Latinidad* has been traditionally sketched by the Hollywood film industry and how this has infiltrated

popular culture. This chapter examines films in which these modern-day stereotypes first appeared. In other words, this sections shows how whites view the image of the Mexican through a "white-colored" lens. The final part of the chapter includes an analysis of the origins of the prevailing Mexican-American sketches in films and how such images appear in a cross-genre setting, from animated features to modern-day online film streaming services.

Chapter 3 of this study focuses on the performance of Mexican-Americanness in the Mexican-American music biopics *La Bamba* and *Selena.* In addition to explaining Mexican-American stereotypes that appear repeatedly, this study also identifies how these images are reconstructed. First, examined is the portrayal of Ritchie Valens as the first Mexican-American rock and roller and the ways in which his assimilationist image making has contributed to a glimpse of the Mexican-American public perception in the United States. Conversely, described is how Selena Quintanilla Pérez, the first *Tejana* crossover star, embodies an ambiguity, or in-betweenness, of Mexican-American identity. Mexican-Americanness emphasizes the reclamation of a lost heritage in both biopics. *La Bamba* and *Selena* serve to illustrate different ways of performing Mexican-Americanness in cinematic depictions. Mexican-American authenticity becomes modified in order to entertain a heterogeneous U.S. audience rather than reflecting fidelity to historical accuracy.

The fourth chapter of the study focuses on the biopic *César Chávez,* and it analyzes Mexican-American performance and the concept of authenticity, the racialization of Mexican-Americans, and the idealization of the Mexican-American activist by Canana, a Mexican-based film studio. Because the spectatorship is Latina/o-centered, authenticity is yet again altered to reflect César Chávez's life as theatrically embellished.

The fifth chapter focuses on the authenticity of Mexican-American performance in *Stand and Deliver*; *McFarland, USA; and Spare Parts*. After analyzing the post-9/11 biographical films *McFarland, USA;* and *Spare Parts*, it examines a pre-9/11 film, *Stand and Deliver*, in order to offer a comparative case study concerning Mexican-Americanness and stereotypes to identify the change over time. Post-September 11 issues inform the themes of these biographical films, namely crop laborer conditions and undocumented migration. Also, through an examination of auditory and visual elements, one can recognize how these factors agglutinate in order to craft the authenticity and artificiality of Mexican-American identity. Themes and elements in *McFarland, USA* and *Spare Parts*, respond to post-September 11. After highlighting Mexican-Americanness in these contemporary biographical films, the 1988 *biopic Stand and Deliver* is analyzed in order to show the different manifestations of Mexican-Americanness from three decades ago.

The conclusion will summarize the main points of the study and link them to ideas for future research, including an examination of international biopics. Research remains to be conducted, for example, about biographical films, such as *Hands of Stone*, a biopic about Robert Duran, a successful Panamanian boxer.

This study examines the ways in which Mexican-American identity has been reshaped in these biographical films. Instead of Latina/os being relegated to a stereotypical representation, they are constructed as empowered, talented, and worthy of being included in the narrative of the North American film industry. In terms of Mexican-American identity, these depictions show deviations from the one-sided, Hollywoodized images traditionally illustrated by the movie industry. Rather than always looking, acting, and behaving as villains, Mexican-Americans appear in more multidimensional roles. Specific cinematic techniques are used to illustrate the

portrait of Latina/o heterogeneity, as well as to identify the shift of Mexican-American perceptions in the public memory.

CHAPTER II

THE HOLLYWOOD PARADIGM OF STEREOTYPICAL *LATINIDAD*

As per the Hollywood paradigm, Latina/os are expected to look, talk, and act a certain way. This Hollywoodized filter has skewed the way Latina/os have been portrayed in film from the Silent Era (1894-1929) to the present day. Before explaining how the phenomenon of *Latinidad*, or Latinness, manifests itself in the genre of biographical films, this chapter explores the parameters of stereotypical *Latinidad* as it has appeared and has been created in a cross-genre setting, such as in various Hollywood films, animated features, and media constructs as viewed through Charles Ramírez-Berg's identification of six main stereotypes, notably: the bandit, the male buffoon, the Latin lover, the dark lady, the harlot, and the female clown.

Before examining the crafting of images as they appear in the biographical films of this study, this chapter examines traditional representations of *Latinidad* as it has manifested historically in Hollywood. Within the realm of Hollywood cinema, Latina/os have been cast in roles that have shown them as the antithesis to the "white, handsome, middle-aged, upper-middle-class, heterosexual, Protestant, Anglo-Saxon male" (67). While the Anglo represents prosperity, the Mexican depicts banditry. Whereas the Anglo is the ultimate embodiment of safety, the Latina/o illustrates danger. While the Anglo maintains the status quo, the Latina/o disrupts it. If the Mexican protagonist requires "saving," the white protagonist will be his redeemer. In sum, one exists in stark contrast to the other. An examination of costumes, make-up, and cinematic performance reveal Hollywood's paradigm for the sketching of a stereotypical *Latinidad*. Traditional *Latinidad* will be examined through the lens of the primary stereotypes identified by Charles Ramirez-Berg.

Not only does the White Anglo Saxon Protestant represent the hero, but he is the final authority on the sketch of the Latina/o image. The image of the Mexican as perceived through the eyes of the WASP appears in *Viva Zapata* (1952), a biographical film about Emiliano Zapata, a Mexican revolutionary. Marlon Brando, an Anglo man, plays the role of Zapata, which was not controversial during this time period. Because Anglos dominated the acting realm, they were perceived as more "authentic" to play the part of nonwhites during this era. Not only do costumes and make-up reveal the way that the Hollywood establishment perceives Mexicans, but also historical distortions contribute to a warped idea of the lives of Mexican-Americans along the United States border. True to the WASP's perceived image of the Mexican, Brando dons the quintessential Mexican mustache, darkens his skin with brownface to appear "brown enough" to be Mexican, and tapes up his eyelids in order to "look" indigenous, which is another Hollywood distortion. At the beginning of the film, Mexican peasants, played by Anglo actors, visit Porfirio Díaz, the Mexican dictator from 1876-1911. Staying true to the trademark Hollywood image of the Mexican, the country dwellers have an exaggerated tan with a "Mexican" mustache and an oversized sombrero in order to look like the image deemed authentic by the WASP. Actual Mexicans do not play the Mexicans in the film; they are Anglos in Mexican "disguises."

Furthermore, the biographical film, replete with historical distortions, blurs reality as it really was. In various scenes, spectators can distinguish Mexicans from non-Mexicans because the differentiating Mexican accessory consists of the quintessential, mariachi-sized sombrero as opposed to a smaller, "Texan-style" one. The biographical film about Emiliano Zapata encapsulates the concept of whites viewing Mexicans through a "white-colored" lens. According to the Anglo perspective, Mexicans look, speak, and act a certain way. Rather than

taking into account various phenotypes, speech patterns, and behaviors, filmmakers have homogenized Hispanics to fit an unmodifiable mold.

Because of the way Latina/os are racialized in film, they are depicted as being non-white. As they are cinematically sketched, they are not considered "real" Americans. To summarize the prevailing image, the figure of Latina/os has been constructed in such a way that it is homogenized, showing them as being dark-skinned, unable to speak English and behaving like a menace to hegemony.

Latina/os were depicted negatively in silent films as well as in "talkies," movies with synchronized dialogue. Representation of Latina/os in film began to shift in the 1940s during the Good Neighbor Policy, the U.S. government's policy doctrine adopted by President Franklin D. Roosevelt. The Rockefellers, a powerful banking family in the United States, advocated for a "Motion Picture Division that would concentrate its efforts on seeing Hollywood films that heretofore had, by and large, presented negative stereotypical images of Latina/os would now present Latin America in more favorable images" (*Adams* 209). The government recognized the importance of diplomacy with its southern neighbors and consequently set out to improve the image of the Latina/o on the silver screen, which had been previously illustrated through limited representations. More than any other stereotype, the image of the Mexican as a bandit prevailed. The Mexican spitfire and the Latin lover were dominant portrayals illustrated by Hollywood. The time had arrived during Roosevelt's administration to showcase *Latinidad* in a more eclectic but inclusive way.

The movement to create more positive images of Latina/os during the 1940s became evident in Disney animated features, such as *The Three Caballeros* (1945). In this film, Donald Duck unwraps various presents given to him by his friends from Latin America in a cinematic

effort to show Latin America in a positive light to U.S. mainstream audiences. To illustrate, Panchito presents Donald with a piñata in order to educate him on traditional Mexican festivities. In another scene, Donald learns about the samba, a dance that originated in Brazil. All in all, this cartoon was one of the first Disney features to illustrate Latina/os in a more humanized way. Donald Duck, as a representative of the WASP way of life, amicably interacts with Latinos. As one of the three caballeros, he exhibits a spirit of solidarity with his Latino counterparts, which is one reason that *The Three Caballeros* resonated with U.S. and Latin American audiences alike.

Of all the six stereotypes delineated in this chapter, only five remain evident in cinema. The stereotype of the virginal dark lady has disappeared, but her antithesis, the promiscuous woman who allures potential suitors with sex appeal, has recurrently appeared to the present day. The dark lady and the harlot represent two types of female Latin lovers in cinema. While the former attracts men through her modesty, the latter attracts them by purposefully enticing them with her seductive persona.

As outlined by Charles Ramírez-Berg in *Latino Images in Film: Stereotypes, Subversion, and Resistance*, the following stereotypes of Latina/os have appeared periodically in Hollywood: the bandit, the harlot, the male buffoon, the female clown, the Latin lover, and the dark lady. Stereotypes as preconceived notions have infiltrated the psyche of filmmakers and spectators alike. Because certain images are so embedded in popular culture, it becomes difficult to deviate from these depictions. Defaulting to what has already been illustrated has become the norm in terms of sketching Latina/os cinematically. In what Ramírez-Berg refers to as a "stereotype commutation test," he includes the following criteria for deciding if a character cast in a film qualifies as a stereotypical depiction:

> Try to substitute another ethnicity into the role being analyzed. If the part can be played just as well as another ethnic, national, or, for that matter, gender group, then it is probably not a stereotype, but rather a stock comic or dramatic type (the jealous husband, the flirtatious wife, the deceptive best friend, and so forth). If no other ethnicity can be readily substituted for the role, then chances are that it relies on specific stereotypical traits of a particular cultural group to make its comedic or dramatic impact. (73)

Keeping this definition in mind, it becomes evident that Latina/os as bandidos, nymphomaniacs, male and female jokers, philanderers, and dark ladies have become the preconceived notions of Latina/o identity according to Anglo filmmakers and spectators. Other ethnicities in the Latina/o sketches of this chapter cannot be substituted for the ones outlined by Ramírez-Berg. In order to redefine *Latinidad*, which will be further examined in this study, an understanding of these key Hollywood Latino configurations is essential.

"Outsiders," a term applied to non-Latina/os in this study, have influenced Latina/o image-crafting in biographical films by the film industry. Two significant outsiders have been the Hollywood movie industry and the United States Census Bureau. These U.S.-based institutions have attempted to unify all Latina/os, homogenizing the identity of various Latina/o-based groups in the process. An entrenched homogenization influences the outcome of the Latina/o image as it has come to be formulated on the silver screen.

The Hollywood movie industry, as an apparatus operating from the outside of the Latina/o community, has made attempts to understand Latina/o identity in its approach to image crafting. Through images that in the United States film industry have come to be automatically associated with Latina/os, such as bandit attire, brown skin, and oversized sombreros, Hollywood has crafted a stereotypical *Latinidad*. Such elements have coalesced to represent a larger,

imaginary whole of *Latinidad* as understood from an outsider's perspective. In other words, the U.S. Hollywood movie industry has lumped together disparate cultural elements, meaning a wide range of Hispanics with their own idiosyncrasies, into a larger, imaginary phenomenon. To illustrate, Puerto Ricans, Mexicans, Cubans, to cite a few examples, have been cinematically sketched to convey the same type of ethnicity. Typically, such an image shows the Mexican-American stereotype as being emblematic of all Hispanics or a misrepresentation of Mexican-American identity through tropicalization, which is a process that adds a Caribbean flavor to Latina/o identity.

Other outsider, U.S.-based viewpoints have influenced the manifestation of *Latinidad* in cinema. Operating as an outsider in its deployment of the term "Hispanic," the Census Bureau created this very same umbrella term in 1970, and it defines "Hispanic or Latino" as "a person of Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican, South or Central American or other Spanish culture or origin regardless of race." This government-invented and imposed nomenclature resulted in a diverse group of people who are perceived as lacking diversity and have been reduced to recurring images, and thus it symbolizes a false archetype of *Latinidad*. Once this perceived-Latina/o paradigm became fossilized and reinforced by outsiders, it became difficult to deviate from a certain falsely prescribed attire, phenotype, and behavior. A staunch critic of catchall categories, sociologist Martha Giménez rejects the usage of any umbrella term assigned to Latina/os. She states that "the label [...] only creates an artificial population; i.e., a statistical construct formed by aggregates of people who differ greatly in terms of national origin, language, race, time of arrival in the United States, culture, minority status [...], social class, and socioeconomic status" (559).

As scholars have attempted to define *Latinidad* as an umbrella term, it has become evident that no unifying characteristics support a cohesive understanding of this social construct. This socially-constructed phenomenon, rather than having any scientific validity or easily-defined common denominators stemming from actual commonalities, has been explored and contextualized by different scholars. In the end, such a term is difficult to define in a concrete way because of its socially-crafted nature and the fluid nature of Hispanic identity politics in the United States.

As this study has previously examined, Benedict Anderson coined the notion of "imagined communities," with culture as a social construct. Anderson explains the phenomenon of culture as social construct: "Communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined" (49). In this case, the U.S. film industry, as a non-Latina/o entity, has falsely "imagined" certain traits in creating "Latinness" as it first appeared and has continued to appear to the present-day. For example, the trope of the Mexican bandit, as he appeared in Western films beginning in the 1920s, has evolved to the modern-day image of the gangster and lowrider. Regardless of specific character depictions in films, Mexican-Americans have long been associated with criminality. Furthermore, Mexican-American women have been linked with hypersexuality, showing off their bodies while being scantily-clad, swiveling their hips in order to entice their suitors, and receiving the blame for a husband's infidelity. This has substantiated Sigmund Freud's Virgin/Whore dichotomy, with cinematic representations of Latinas often falling under the latter part of the dichotomy.

The concept of a single, specific Latina/o identity, which is used synonymously with the term *Latinidad,* has been examined from various scholarly vantage points. Sociologist Félix Padilla in 1985 identified the Spanish language as the linguistic thread that unified Mexican and

Puerto Rican populations. Nicholas De Genova and Ana Yolanda Ramos-Zoyas in *Latino Crossings* (2003), disagree with this notion of *Latinidad* by acknowledging the increasing number of Latina/os in the United States who solely speak English. Since the 1980s, this English population has continued to grow as the result of increased immigration to the United States. As a result, *Latinidad* cannot be perceived from the assumption that all Latina/os speak Spanish. De Genova and Ramos-Zayas have described *Latinidad* as a socially-constructed phenomenon:

> "There is no automatic or inevitable necessity to the emergence of a shared sense of Latino identity, as indeed there are never any natural or self-evident positive grounds for any identity. Identities must be produced through social relations and struggle" (21).

The term "Latina/o," rather than being an identity construct with origins in Latin America by Latin Americans, has been socially constructed in the United States. Marcelo Suarez-Orozco and Mariela Paez succinctly capture the essence of the version of *Latinidad* applied in this study: "Latinos are made in the USA" (4). Consequently, this results in a homogenized notion of Mexican-Americanness, which has been constructed in a one-sided way by various U.S. based institutions, such as the Census Bureau and the Hollywood movie industry. In the biopics examined in this study, the images ascribed to Latina/os have been crafted by the lens of onlookers from the outside. Through an "outsider's" perspective of *Latinidad*, the Hollywood film industry has fashioned Latina/os through casting choices and its perception of "imagined communities" by trying to define how Latina/os look and act. For example, according to these outsiders, Latina/os should be brown, they should not be intelligent, and they should *appear* to be lazy.

Latinidad is an ever-changing, contested identity produced by non-Latinos in the U.S. in order to ascribe meaning to Latinos residing in the country. No inherent Latina/o essence exists.

Non-Latina/os ascribe an imaginary in order to make sense of an identity that is not their own. This notion of *Latinidad* as created by non-Latinos can be seen through the image crafting of Latina/os in this study.

Examining traditional, stereotypical *Latinidad* in popular culture helps to reframe the diverse nature of *Latinidad* examined in the biopics of this study. Various generations have been subjected to certain images of Latina/os, from children who grew up watching *Looney Tunes* in the 1950s to children currently growing up watching films through movie-streaming services, such as Netflix and Hulu.

Hollywood has assigned certain characteristics to Latinos in cinema. During the Silent Era (1894-1929), Rudolph Valentino gave life to the sketch of the original Latin lover, which continues to appear on the silver screen and in other entertainment media to the present day. Although he was Italian, and not Latino, he became emblematic of Latin lovers.

The image of the Latin lover emerged during the Roaring Twenties. In 1921, Valentino, the original "Latin lover," starred in *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse,* one of the highest-grossing films of the silent era. Alluring and seductive, he played the role of Julio Desnoyers in this film. An iconic tango dance sequence transpires in which Desnoyers tries to cut in when he sees a man and a woman dancing at a saloon. The man refuses to let Desnoyers dance with his partner, and a duel between the two quickly ensues. Shortly thereafter, Desnoyers and the woman dance seductively. Through the role of Desnoyers, Rudolph Valentino played the role of a handsome lover, leaving spectators entranced by the seductive nature of his performance. He winked and wore tight-fitting clothes, black culottes, and a gaucho sombrero. After his role in this film, he reprised the role of the Latin lover in other cinematic works. Due to Valentino's role, the details of the Latin lover's attire emerged and became iconic in these early films. The

costume of the Latino master romancer entered public memory and became culturally encoded in mainstream society as an image of *Latinidad*.

Shortly thereafter, in the same year, Valentino further cemented the sketch of the Latin lover in *The Sheik* (1921). From then on, the Hollywood movie industry regarded him as the unofficial Latin lover. With his long eyelashes and slicked-back hair, he was a living aesthetic art form to behold. In *The Sheik* he played the role of Sheik Ahmed Ben Hassan, which even though he played the part of an Arab rather than a Latino, made him a household name. Hollywood not only homogenized the image of the Latina/o, but it lumped together all people with similar phenotypes, as is evident through Hollywood's decision to cast Valentino, an honorary Latino, as an Arab. Valentino's role in *The Sheik* illustrates the extent to which Hollywood standardized Mexican-American ethnicity through the imprinted image of dark-complected actors. An Italian-born immigrant, Valentino played the role of an Arab leader and master romancer in the film. As a result of his portrayal in this silent movie, Valentino made his mark as the original male sex symbol in Hollywood. His greased hair and dark eyes imprinted a certain image of how the lover should appear in popular culture. In the same manner, Lou Diamond Phillips, a non-Latino, was cast to play the role of Mexican-American Ritchie Valens in the biopic *La Bamba* because of what the film industry has deemed an acceptable image of the Latino. Phillips, a dark-skinned non-Latino was cast to the play the role of Ritchie Valens, a Latino because of similarity in phenotypical characteristics.

Modern-day incarnations of the Latin lover have appeared in various media, from films to movie-streaming services. In the movie *How to Be a Latin Lover* (2017), Eugenio Derbez plays the role of a master romancer. Like Valentino and all the depictions of Latin lovers before him on the silver screen, Derbez's character exemplifies the behavior of what the film industry has

come to expect of Latinos: they relentlessly pursue the objects of their desire by dressing, speaking, and acting a certain way in order to win the heart of their beloved. In various scenes, he tries to seduce women and even tries to teach a young boy the "art" of being a gigolo.

In the 2016 *Fuller House* Netflix series, the Latin lover stereotype appears through the role of Fernando-Hernández-Guerrero-Fernández-Guerrero, Kimmy Gibbler's ex-husband. He personifies the image of the "tall, dark and handsome" Latino, often wooing Kimmy with flowers and showering her with relentless displays of affection. He Hispanicizes her name to *Kimberlina*, often adding the term of endearment "mi amor" to the end of her name. Even the usage of the long last name of Fernando-Hernández-Guerrero-Fernández-Guerrero shows filmmakers' perception of Hispanics as having endless surnames. With his tight-fitting shirts and pants, he aims to win the heart of his lady love. Keeping with the tradition of the Latin lover trope, he continues his "philandering" ways even after he has won the object of his affections. In other words, like any Latin lover that follows the prescribed Hollywood formula, he is sketched as having an insatiable appetite for conquest.

In the following analysis, contemporary examples show the prevalence of Latina/o stereotypes. *The Mask of Zorro* (1998) shows a hybridization of the Latin lover and bandit stereotypes. Not only does Antonio Banderas radiate sex appeal through his tight-fitting apparel, seductive aura, and physical appeal, but he also represents thievery. According to Behnken and Smithers,

> He is a thinly disguised bandito...a Latin lover who fights for this woman and wins the day, and the heart of the woman he desires. In contrast, the other Latinos portrayed in the Mask of Zorro are ignoble, drunken fools who abuse their power and authority and lack moral decency. (71)

Antonio Banderas, a Spanish actor that has come to symbolize *Latinidad* in a homogeneous manner further examined in this study, represents a present-day Rudolph Valentino. Similar in attire and appearance, he wears tight-fitting apparel, has greased hair, and a black gaucho hat, the quintessential accessory of the Latin lover. Valentino set the standard for the criteria of the Latin lover, and this image engraved itself in popular culture. For decades, this formula of the Latino philanderer has been perpetuated. For example, Puss in Boots, a character in *Shrek 2* (2011), *Shrek the Third* (2007), *Shrek Forever After* (2010), and *Puss in Boots* (2011) wears the black gaucho hat and culottes reminiscent of the original image of the Latin lover as prescribed by Rudolph Valentino. His attire does not change from one film to another, symbolizing the inflexible image that filmmakers have prescribed for the role of the Latin lover. Furthermore, because he "sounds" like a Latin lover and has been associated with this image in *The Mask of Zorro*, Antonio Banderas voices the role of Puss in Boots, a parody of the Zorro character.

Hollywood has prescribed a specific formula for the image of the Latin lover and has rarely deviated from it when deciding to include such a character in cinematic narratives. As per this formula, donned in his typical apparel of the lover's mask and boots, he is portrayed as a hero who wins the heart of his lady love.

Forever doomed to be the villain and not the hero of the cinematic narrative, the Mexican also has appeared as a bandit in the western movie genre and as a gangster in modern-day incarnations of this stereotype. Another modern-day apparition of this stereotype, which has also received considerable time on the silver screen in the past two decades, is the image of the drug trafficker. The Hollywood industry has produced many narco narratives in recent years, and the

Latino drug dealer trope has appeared in films such as *Once Upon a Time in Mexico* (2003), *The Mule* (2018), and *Peppermint* (2018).

The bandit as the most prevalent stereotype with the inception of Silent Era films morphed into similar images, such as that of the greaser and the Los Angeles lowriders. After the U.S. war with Mexico from 1846-1848, the derogatory term "greaser" rose in popularity during a turbulent time of racial conflict. Anglos perceived that Mexicans' skin tone resulted from the direct application of grease to the skin. According to historian Arnoldo De León in *They Called Them Greasers*, in order to facilitate the transport of cargo, Mexican laborers applied grease to their backs (16). Greasers, then, represented incarnations of bandits because they were dark-skinned and linked to criminality. This image first began to appear in Western films such as *Tony the Greaser* (1911), and *The Greaser's Revenge* (1914). Another manifestation of this stereotype has been that of the lowrider in Los Angeles. Traditionally speaking, the lowrider has been linked with criminality rather than being a law-abiding citizen like his Anglo counterpart.

In addition to the image of the Latin lover, Zorro represents the modern-day bandit as greaser stereotype. This character emerged in the silent films of the 1920s. Douglas Fairbanks, rather than an actual Latino, played the original Zorro. Decades later, in 1998's *The Mask of Zorro*, Antonio Banderas was cast to play the swashbuckling protagonist. Whether the iconic figure was played by an Anglo or a Spaniard who has come to represent all Latina/os in Hollywood, the Fairbanks and Banderas bandit characters represent thievery and a disruption to the Anglo world. While one actor was Anglo, the other was of Spanish descent. However, Hollywood manipulated their image in such a way that it portrayed white mainstream's version of the brown-skinned Latino with a perceived propensity toward banditry.

The images of Latinos have been portrayed invariably by mass media starting with television series from the 1950s. Ricky Ricardo, played by Desi Arnaz in *I Love Lucy*, exemplifies the traditional Hollywood image of the Latino as a buffoon, as simple-minded and consistently the subject of a joke. As the male buffoon, Ricardo has specific physical traits and a type of comportment that follows the Hollywood pattern of stereotypical *Latinidad*. With his heavily-greased hair, he often loses his temper and appears emotionally volatile. This type of behavior has been deemed acceptable and admitted by Anglo filmmakers and spectators. Lucy speaks standard English, and Ricky speaks a non-standard variation. With his heavily-accented English, one of his trademark phrases has become that his wife has "some 'splainin' to do." His trademark phrase not only encompassed a "broken" variation English but it also served to index a masculine dominance over his wife.

Not perceived as capable of mastering the English language, Ricky Ricardo often mispronounces words and resorts to uttering phrases in Spanish in fits of rage or frustration. Lucy, played by Lucille Ball, represents normativity as a member of the Anglo community. The WASP filmmakers, as well as WASP spectators, have etched the image of Ricky Ricardo as the counter-image of Lucy and exemplar of the status quo in their culture. To distinguish between the member of the status quo and the exotic Latino, the concept of rambling in Spanish so that it sounds unintelligible to an English-speaking audience has been framed as an expected behavioral pattern of the Spanish-speaking Other.

The biographical film ¡*Viva Zapata!* reveals a crafting of the phenotypes of Mexicans, but also how Anglos perceive their conduct. The dialogue included in the ¡*Viva Zapata!* screenplay reveals these entrenched racist attitudes against Mexicans and the types of behavioral associations made to members of this ethnicity. The following utterances reveal how the Anglo

perceives the Mexican, the disrupting member of the status quo: "They're so lazy. If they're not stealing, they're asleep. If they're awake, they're drunk" (21:49-21:56). In this scene, Anglos criticize field laborers and sketch them as unreliable drunks. Anglos have come to expect certain behaviors from Mexicans. The behavioral image expected of the Mexican entails being a rabble-rouser and possessing little to no work ethic.

The stereotype of the Mexican bandit, or bandido, first appeared in the Western film movie genre and has manifested itself in a cross-genre manner. From the time the first Mexican was depicted as villainous in the first Western in which he appeared, the bandido has been the most-widely assigned image of the Mexican-American in various forms, from the image of a countryside looter to the more recent evolution of this image to that of the drug trafficker. Charles Ramírez-Berg provides the following definition of the bandit stereotype:

> El bandido is dirty and unkempt...Behaviorally, he is vicious, cruel, treacherous, shifty, and dishonest; psychologically, he is irrational, overly emotional, and quick to resort to violence. His inability to speak English or his speaking English with a heavy Spanish accent is Hollywood's way of signaling his feeble intellect, a lack of brainpower that makes it impossible for him to plan or strategize successfully (68).

The Latino as bandit has not only appeared in the genre of Western films, but has also extended to animated features, such as Speedy Gonzales in Warner Brothers' Looney Tunes Cartoons from the 1950s. Speedy Gonzales, in his white campesino outfit, red bandana, and yellow sombrero zooms from point A to point B, shouting *ándale, ándale, arriba, arriba* with his heavily-accented English and periodic insertion of words in Spanish. This was one such image of Latina/os that entered public memory in the United States and consequently affected

how future Latina/o illustrations developed on the silver screen. To reiterate, this is an example of how Latinidad has been "made in the U.S.A."

The stereotype of the bandit shows the ingrained Hollywood belief that this character, and by extension, the majority of those of Mexican descent, is unable to speak a standard dialect of English. In a well-known episode, erroneously mistaking a wind-up female mouse for a real one, Speedy Gonzales demonstrates a romantic interest in her through his broken English, as is evident in the following dialogue: "Buenas noches, señorita. You do *anythings* tonight?" In the translation from Spanish to English, the non-existent plural form of "algo" or "anything" makes no grammatical sense. Through this contrary scene, the scriptwriter appears to prove the "feeble intellect" according to Ramírez-Berg of the Mexican bandit by inserting an English language mistake with no logical basis.

Television shows create and cultivate racial prejudice and assumptions in kids from a young age. In *Racism in America Popular Media* by Brian D. Behnken and Gregory D. Smithers, they explain the influence of Speedy Gonzales in popular culture:

> The Speedy Gonzales series serves as one of the only cartoon series to feature a title character who caricatured an entire ethno-national community. The series, and Speedy himself, mocked the Mexican/Mexican American community in innumerable ways, both small and large, throughout the series. (112)

In contrast to the standard English spoken by Sylvester the Cat, the image of Speedy Gonzales as being unable to speak standard English appears regularly to emphasize his never-ending status as the Other. Within the same series, when other Mexican mice are shown, they wear the same outfit with oversized sombreros and speak the same substandard, heavily-accented English. Whenever the image of the Mexican appears, it appears as the traditional one-sided

Hollywood portrayal of how members of this ethnicity look and act. Furthermore, inherent racism exists with the selection of a rodent to illustrate the image of the Mexican. In the animal world, rodents are vermin to be extinguished. Vermin are nuisances who transmit diseases, which reinforces the stereotype of the "dirty" Mexican, a trope that will be further examined in this chapter. Much insight can be revealed by taking note of the costumes that are perceived of the Mexican in media and how it has appeared in animated features.

Latina/o scholar Angharad N. Valdivia explains that the bandit stereotype "was used to represent both notable figures in the Mexican Revolution such as Pancho Villa and Emiliano Zapata and hordes of anonymous invading and marauding bandits roaming the countryside and threatening the calm and repose of an otherwise civilized setting" (86). Speedy Gonzales, bolting from one point to another, constantly disrupts the harmonious setting around him. In several instances, he appears, seemingly out of nowhere, and shouts, "¡Epa!" His element of surprise represents the villainous Mexican as the invader of the civilized Anglo. As Speedy Gonzales sneaks up behind an unsuspecting person, the person screams and jumps up in the air. In consonance with the image portrayed in Westerns, the bandit appeared out of nowhere and threatened the white people of the countryside when, in fact, the majority were indigenous to that area and the Anglo settlers were the "invaders." In Looney Tunes, while the Mexican bandit represented criminality, the white person represented civilization and tranquility.

Another variation of the Mexican as a bandit is the image of the "dirty" Mexican. In the 1930s, Mexicans in the U.S. were racialized in such a way that made them appear as innately disease-ridden. In order to convince the general public of their undesirability with the end goal of deporting them, health officials used scientific discourse in order to racialize Mexicans. According to historian Natalia Molina in *Fit to Be Citizens? Public Health and Race in Los*

Angeles, (1879-1939), the effect of health discourse in promoting this negative perception through medical substantiation appears as follows:

> Buttressed by ideologically defined medical standards, the inferiority of Mexicans became "indisputable." Now public health discourses - especially the notions that Mexicans were disease carriers and an exceptionally fertile people - were mobilized to legitimize the removal of the same population that only a few years earlier had been deemed an essential source of cheap labor. (10-11)

One such variation of this stereotype is illustrated through the media creation of Frito Bandito, the Frito Lays mascot from 1967 to 1971. Similar to Speedy Gonzales, Frito Bandito reflects the same image of a Mexican campesino. In contrast to the illustration of Speedy Gonzales, Frito Bandito reflects an unhygienic Mexican who steals Fritos corn chips. His penchant for stealing chips reflects the "bandit" part of his identity. The original depiction showed him with unkempt hair and a golden tooth. This revealed the underlying prejudices and perceptions of Anglos toward Mexicans as being the dirty Other. After complaints lodged by the National Mexican-American Anti-Defamation Committee and other advocates for better representation of Mexicans, Frito Lays "cleaned up" the illustration of Frito Bandito by replacing his gold tooth with a white one and by changing the drawing to one of him with combed, tidy hair. One demeaning image of a Mexican transformed to a less demeaning sketch rather than sketching the Frito Bandit in a humanized fashion. The example of the Frito Bandito depiction shows how racialization of Mexicans as disease carriers infiltrated the media and popular culture.

Before political awareness, Mexican women were stereotypically perceived as spitfires in order to explain their volatility. For the sake of this study, the female clown and the Mexican spitfire are used interchangeably even though Ramírez-Berg opts for the specific word choice of

female clown for this image. As Ramírez-Berg has mentioned, Lupe Vélez in *Honolulu Lu* (1941) illustrates the stereotypical depiction of the female clown. Vélez often entertained her audiences with her heavily accented-English and "fiery" personality. As a result, she was often pigeonholed to play the same kind of character in movies. She was the ultimate embodiment of the distorted perception assigned to Mexicans by a white audience and film-producing entity. Even a few of her nicknames, including Tabasco and Tamale, illustrate the fiery spirit others recognized in her and attributed to her ethnicity. Due to the prejudicial assumption that Mexicans were spirited because of their ethnic origin, it was difficult for mainstream U.S. audiences to acknowledge other constituents of personality.

Lupe Vélez is perhaps most widely known for her role in *Mexican Spitfire* (1940) directed by Leslie Goodwins. After she starred in this film, a highly-successful Mexican Spitfire television series named after the movie was created. Through her role as Carmelita, she has a spunky personality and is sketched as unable to master English:

> ELIZABETH: We're going to take a little shopping tour on the way home and pick up your wardrobe for fall.
>
> CARMELITA: Oh, but I'm not gonna fall.
>
> ElIZABETH: Oh, I mean buy autumn clothes.
>
> CARMELITA: Oh. (5:38-5:46)

Like Ricky Ricardo, Carmelita is illustrated as defaulting to her native Spanish in moments of anger. After drinking with her husband's ex-girlfriend, she makes a toast and, in a moment of frustration toward her husband's former suitor, rapidly utters, *cara de perro antipático,* which means "face of an unpleasant dog." This same behavioral pattern of rambling in Spanish so that it sounds unintelligible to a white, monolingual audience emerges periodically

throughout the film. The white establishment has decided that these moments provide comedic relief at the expense of the Spanish-speaker who will never achieve an acceptable level of English language proficiency.

Lupe Vélez's personality mirrors that of the iconic character of Carmelita that she played on the silver screen. She often displayed an animated persona and behaved flirtatiously with others. Michelle Vogel wrote a biography about Vélez, the woman iconically linked with the image of the Mexican spitfire. According to Vogel in *Lupe Vélez: the Life and Career of Mexico's Spitfire:*

> Lupe made the leap from silent to sound films with little effort, despite her accent. She was very often typecast as the hotheaded Latin firecracker, but she made the best of it and got plenty of work because of her personality. Lupe's broken English and mixed-up phrasing were purposefully played up to fit the character she was pigeonholed to play. Her spunky, go-get-'em attitude, flirtatious winks, flickering eyebrows, and shoulder shrugs, all made for a unique package. (5-6)

Lupe Vélez became known as the exemplar of the Mexican spitfire. Her unpredictability became stereotypically associated with her nationality while it is actually believed that she suffered from undiagnosed bipolar disorder. The act of attributing her behavior to ethnic origin is one example of entrenched racism in the U.S. and does not take into account various factors, such as mental illness and home environment that contribute to personality types. As has been previously mentioned, the volatile Mexican was perceived as such because of her ethnic origin.

The dark lady and the harlot echo Freud's madonna/whore dichotomy in reference to sexuality. Women are either depicted as saintly like the stereotype of the dark lady or objects of desire like the Latina harlot in film.

The dark lady as a stereotype, not to be confused with the female harlot image, reflects a walking contradiction because her aloof nature, rather than her flirtatious personality, attracts men. The characteristics that make her saintly make her sexually appealing to her audience.

Dolores del Rio has been referred to as "the female Valentino." She starred in movies such as *Ramona* (1928), *Evangelina* (1929), and *In Caliente* (1935). With her dark hair, skin, and eyes, she is aptly identified by Ramirez-Berg as an embodiment of the "dark lady" stereotype. According to him, the dark lady, or the Latina who serves as a counterpart to the Latin lover, appears as a desexualized, aristocratic, and aloof:

> The female Latin lover is virginal, inscrutable, aristocratic—and erotically appealing precisely because of these characteristics. Her cool distance is what makes her fascinating to Anglo males. In comparison with the Anglo woman, she is circumspect and aloof where her Anglo sister is direct and forthright, reserved where the Anglo female is boisterous, opaque where the Anglo woman is transparent. (76)

Unlike the female harlot, she is erotically desirable because she keeps her distance from men, thus attracting them because of her detached persona. Instead of wearing alluring clothing, the dark lady dresses modestly, in a long, white dress that makes her physique invisible.

From a cinematic perspective, the stereotype of the dark lady can be seen in the film *In Caliente* (1935). Dolores del Rio plays the role of Rita Gómez. In a scene that transpires in a cabaret, many people stare at Rita in amazement while she dances gracefully in a flowing white dress with her dance partner. Even though she is a desexualized being, she becomes the object of desire of men in the room because of her aura. Her modesty, rather than her sexual prowess, attracts her suitors. Even the white color of her party dress symbolizes purity, reinforcing the

virginal aspect of Freud's virgin/whore dichotomy. The dialogue in the film reflects how the aesthetic beauty of this version of the female Latin lover stems from a place of innocence:

> LAWRENCE: I'm in love. Harold, I'm in love with the most beautiful, most divine creature in all the world.

Rita emits a saintly aura, with her entire body covered in white gowns every time she appears in the film. Rather than being flirtatious with men, she detaches herself from her suitors, which adds to her sex appeal.

In recent decades, the dark lady stereotype no longer appears in films. However, as can be concluded from the following section, the other Latina lover, the harlot as a stereotype, of *Latinidad* has persisted.

Linda Darnell, although she is not Latina, in *My Darling Clementine* (1946) is an archetypal example of the Latina harlot in film. As has been previously mentioned, in terms of acting in Hollywood, Anglos were cast to play Latino roles because, at the time, they were the only accepted actors in Hollywood. In her role as Chihuahua, Doc Holliday's significant other in the movie, she exhibits the image of the harlot, scantily clad, with heavy make-up, and sexually-seductive body movements. Like in *Viva Zapata*, this film shows a white actress wearing the Mexican costume as perceived through the Anglo's eyes. Darnell's hair was dyed an extremely dark color so that she would "pass" for Mexican, which was not controversial due to the lack of political correctness in the 1940s. As has been observed in the *Zapata* biopic, an Anglo character changed her physical characteristics in order to fit the image expected of her as a pseudo-Latina.

Darnell masters the role of the female sex symbol in this film. Her character seems to exist for the sole purpose of providing sexual gratification for her male suitor. She embodies the

unattainable, exotic Other to be pursued by the Anglo cowboy, the character who represents the mainstream spectatorship. When she first appears in a saloon, she seductively places her leg on a table to entice a cowboy. Even though he rejects her overtures, this shows the woman as readily willing to gratify the men around her. From a cinematic perspective, she is shown as lacking agency over her own body. Her tight-fitting dress reveals the curvaceous features of her body, and she moves in enticingly seductive ways. Unlike the virginal dark lady, the female harlot unapologetically seeks out to conquer various men.

Hollywood has applied the paradigm of the female harlot to more contemporary films. For example, in *Fools Rush In* (1997), Salma Hayek plays the role of Isabel Fuentes Whitman. From the beginning of the film, she appears as an over-sexualized character. She first appears in the film, floating down the river in an inner tube, dressed in a blouse that leaves little to the imagination: her hourglass figure is apparent, and her abdominal area is completely uncovered. Two young boys, representative of the male gaze in film, watch her from a distance. As Isabel makes it to shore, she asks the young men how long they have been watching her. One of them confesses that they have been watching her from the time she stole the inner tube, which belonged to one of them. The first boy tells Isabel to keep the inner tube because his friend is in love with her. Early on in this film from the 1990s, the harlot stereotype becomes apparent through Salma's sex appeal. Her character is presented in such a way that demonstrates that she is the male's object of desire. She wears a revealing outfit and moves seductively in order to sketch the image of the Latina harlot as prescribed by Hollywood.

In the aforementioned scene, the Other, indicated by the presence of the harlot, resides in rural Mexico. The ambiance of Otherness is masterfully crafted on the silver screen. Isabel resides in the countryside and speaks Spanish, which shows the backward perception that the

filmmakers have of her life, which is shown as being the opposite of "normal" culture in the United States. Matthew Perry, in the role of Alex Whitman, is shown at a Christmas party in the United States. His life, as opposed to Isabel's in Mexico, represents the way of life that Anglo filmmakers and spectators perceive as the norm. The next time Isabel appears, she is dressed up in a leather jacket that reveals her cleavage. As is evident from these examples, she is sketched as a seductive Latina in the same way that Linda Darnell was in *My Darling Clementine.* However, one major difference is that a Latina actress actually plays a Latina in *Fools Rush In.* In recent decades, Hollywood seems to recognize the importance of casting actual Latinas for Latina roles.

The Latino as a drug trafficker, as identified by popular culture scholar Camilla Fojas in *Border Bandits*, became popular in the 1980s and 1990s, coinciding with northbound migration by immigrants fleeing collapsing economies in Latin America (21). Movies about Latino drug lords began to emerge, such as the following: *Extreme Prejudice* (1987), *Deep Cover* (1992), *American Me* (1992), and *Traffic* (2000). The variations of the bandit have changed to mirror social change over time. First, they were cinematically sketched as villains in westerns and over the years, the bandit image manifested itself as a greaser, gangster, and drug lord.

Hollywood has consistently assigned differentiating characteristics to Hispanics and Anglos, sketching the former as demeaning and a contrast to their latter counterparts. Hispanics have appeared as bandits, drug lords, male buffoons, female clowns or spitfires, while the dark lady stereotype has disappeared.

The alternative sketches of *Latinidad* in this study redefine "a long history of abusive portrayals and stereotypical renderings of Chicanos and their lifestyles" (167) as described by activist filmmaker Jesús Salvador Treviño in *Chicano Cinema and Identity: Crossing the Border*

from Self to Other. Rather than showing the heterogeneity of Latina/os, traditional *Latinidad* in Hollywood has reduced them to the tropes mentioned in this chapter. In the subsequent chapter of this study, diversified roles of Latina/os in biographical films will be examined.

CHAPTER III

BIOPICS OF MEXICAN-AMERICAN MUSICIANS: PERFORMING A LOST HERITAGE IN CALIFORNIA AND TEXAS

Filmmakers and audience members alike have become interested in the lives of musical legends, especially within the last few decades. For example, the movies *Ray* (2004) and *Walk the Line* (2005) garnered awards for their depictions of soul music sensation, Ray Charles, and country legend, Johnny Cash, respectively. Situating Latina/os in mainstream film demonstrates a renewed interest in the growing present-day Latina/o demographics and a resurging interest in the lives of influential Latina/o musical artists. Among the highest-grossing biopics of all time, *La Bamba* (1987), directed by Luis Váldez, and *Selena* (1997), directed by Gregory Nava, have achieved a memorable place in the narrative of popular culture. These biopics provide substantive insight into the ways that Mexican-American identity has been constructed by the Hollywood film industry. *La Bamba* offers an assimilationist perspective of Mexican-American identity while also recognizing the importance of heritage, however subtly it appears, in the process of crafting ethnicity. On the other hand, *Selena* illustrates Mexican-American identity as a phenomenon that requires retention of Mexican roots on a quest of self-fulfillment.

Director Luis Váldez incorporates Mexican-American elements, such as *curanderismo* and references to Quetzalcóatl in his cinematographic work, as well as offering a commentary on stereotypical and non-stereotypical aspects of Mexican-American identity. Ritchie Valens' brother, Bob, perpetuates the image of the quintessential Mexican-American male while Ritchie Valens presents a kind of Mexican-Americanness that embraces elements of mainstream U.S. culture. On the other hand, *Selena* provides a different angle of Mexican-American identity that

is less assimilationist and more centered on the importance that reclaiming one's heritage can play in cultural identity.

La Bamba and *Selena* examine the ways in which Latina/o identity was crafted on the screen in the 1980s and 1990s. Instead of Latina/os being homogenized into a static and imagined form of *Latinidad* or erased altogether in mainstream culture, they are constructed as empowered, talented, and worthy of being central in the narrative in the biographical films of this study. Even though these two films retain characteristics of historically identified stereotypes, *La Bamba* and *Selena* as musical Latina/o biopics function as sites of cultural identity and remapping in which divergent images of *Latinidad* are crafted.

A *bona fide* Latino icon, Ritchie Valens enjoyed a highly successful, albeit short-lived, rock and roll career. He contributed to Latina/o visibility and an image shift of this ethnicity in mainstream Anglo-American popular culture, establishing this demographic as a legitimate part of the cultural composition within the United States. With the Latina/o presence came the establishment of a profitable market in the North American film industry. Latinos and non-Latinos alike, regardless of Spanish language proficiency, sang along to the infectious melody of "La Bamba" after the release of the biopic in 1987. *La Bamba*, produced and distributed by Columbia Pictures, was nominated for a Golden Globe in 1988 in the category of Best Motion Picture, further proof that the Mexican-American experience was becoming an accepted subject of interest by the film industry and audiences in the United States.

La Bamba is a biopic that can be categorized as a Mexican-American assimilationist film. *Ritchie Valens: the First Latino Rocker* (1987) by Beverly Mendheim offers a comprehensive look at the biography of Valenzuela from childhood to adulthood. On the other hand, *La Bamba*

is an account of a Mexican-American that is highly fictionalized but succeeds at making a social commentary on Mexican-American identity. This phenomenon of Mexican-Americanness is created from director Luis Váldez's own Chicanidad, as well as what he is able to piece together of Valens' life. Mendheim's biography presents information lacking in the 1987 biopic.

Ricardo "Ritchie" Esteban Valenzuela Reyes was born in Pacoima, California, on May 13, 1941, to a working-class family. From a young age, he seemed poised for musical success due to his passion for music and to the support that he received from his musically-inclined family members. His father, Steve Valenzuela, encouraged him to sing and to play the guitar and trumpet from a young age. According to Beverly Mendheim in *Ritchie Valens: the First Latino Rocker*, one of his relatives purportedly helped Ritchie construct a toy guitar from a cigar box when he was five years old, and John Lozano, his uncle schooled him on different chords of the guitar (19). As he grew up and began junior high, he often took his guitar to school and played it at lunchtime and during school breaks throughout the day. Evidently, music played an important role in his daily life. Little did the world know that this young Mexican-American would someday achieve a nationwide success as a Latino rock 'n' roll musician. On his trajectory to success, Valens overcame systemic racism.

The literary antecedent includes the childhood and adolescence of Valens' life. The 1987 film, on the other hand, shows a fictionalized version of only one of the two life stages. This is important for this study because Váldez opts to include a fictionalized account of the rock 'n' roller's adolescence. The focus is on Valens as a legend but the film also provides insight into the configuration of Mexican-American identity on the silver screen, as well as the filter through which Hollywood conforms identity to have mainstream appeal. Mendheim's written biography

of Ritchie Valens demonstrates a factual version of the musician's life while Váldez's filmic version alters reality, inflecting Mexican-American identity as an assimilationist phenomenon. Thus, the *Latinidad* demonstrated in the biopic is that of working-class Mexican-American in the United States who garnered success through assimilation.

La Bamba illustrates Ritchie Valenzuela's life story as one in which he was able to become successful by assimilating to the U.S. mainstream. His name was changed to conform to the expectations of recording companies, and he was encouraged to play rock 'n' roll music in English. Bob Keane, the president of Del-Fi records, shortened "Valenzuela" to "Valens" for the sake of widening his appeal to the mainstream audience. He explains the metamorphosis of Ritchie's name in the following scene:

> BOB KEANE: From now on, it's Ritchie with a "t". R-I-T-C-H-I-E. I got a new last name for you, too. Valens with an "s". Ritchie Valens. How does that grab you?
>
> RITCHIE: I don't like it. (*La Bamba,* 54:15-54:50)

Ricardo Valenzuela becomes culturally "whitened" by having his name condensed to Ritchie Valens. The hyphenation of Mexican-American identity does not exist in *La Bamba,* as being the "American" part becomes more important than the "Mexican" part. In a prior moment leading to this conversation, the camera shows a close-up of Keane writing variations of Valenzuela's last name on notebook paper. For example, he scribbles down *Richard Valenzuela, Richard Zuela, Rickie Zuela,* and finally *Ritchie Valens.* The heritage of Ritchie Valenzuela becomes altered in order to have mainstream appeal, so he cannot exist in the in-between space of Mexican-Americanness. Instead, he feels the push-pull factors imposed on him by the mainstream musical arena. Rather than being encouraged to be true to his heritage, he must

relinquish this part of his identity in order to appeal to the consumers of rock 'n' roll in the United States.

La Bamba unravels on the silver screen in such a way that it takes a white mainstream audience into account while also recognizing Mexican-Americans as spectators in the United States. The writer and producer of *La Bamba*, Luis Váldez, known as the Father of Campesino Theater, reconstructed the life of a Latino musician based on the limited information he was able to access from Valens' family, as the family of Ritchie Valens was reticent to reveal details about his life. As a consequence of limited information, director Luis Váldez exercised his own creative license and his understanding of Chicanidad in the Ritchie Valens biographical film. In the process of crafting the screenplay, he had to translate an abstract understanding of the life of Ritchie Valens into a concrete interpretation on the screen. Such a process reveals the intricacies of how filmmakers depict Latina/o identity in film. Váldez links the character of Ritchie Valens with Aztec heritage roots, which was a basis of foundation for other Mexican-American viewers. For the purpose of creating an identity separate from white nationalism, Mexican-Americans turned to their own Aztec history as a starting point, focusing on the beliefs of their indigenous ancestors. One such belief was that of Quetzalcóatl, the feathered serpent sun god. An advocate of the Mexican-American Movement, it was also important for Váldez to infuse the biopic with the pre-Columbian history of Mexican-Americans. In an interview with David Savran, Váldez says the following:

> There's another god of culture, Quetzalcóatl, the feathered serpent, who's much kinder. He surfaces in *La Bamba* as the figure of Ritchie Valens. He's an artist and poet and is gentle and not at all fearful. When audiences see *La Bamba*, they like that positive spirit.

> The Pachuco's a little harder to take. But these are evolutions. I use the metaphor of the serpent crawling out of its skin. There's that symbolism in *La Bamba*--it's pre-Columbian, but it's also very accurate in terms of the way that I view my own life. I've crawled through many of my own dead skins. (265)

The snake shows up repeatedly throughout *La Bamba.* In the opening scene of the biopic, when Bob is riding his motorcycle, he almost runs over a snake crossing the highway, barely missing it as it slithers away. Later, after Ritchie's night of debauchery in Tijuana, he awakens at the curandero's home to a taxidermied snake looking him in the eye. Shortly thereafter, the curandero is carrying two dead snakes when he and Valens meet for the first time. Then he skins the snakes in front of the brothers as they eat the snake tacos that the folk man has prepared for them. Like the pre-Columbian symbol of the serpent, Valens will "crawl out of his own skin" when he meets his tragic demise at the age of 17. The film, then, succeeds in linking Valens' identity to the Aztec historical elements of Mexican-Americans. Due to the Mexican-American symbolism that appears throughout *La Bamba,* a nuanced portrayal of Mexican-Americans emerges. By including a lost heritage of Mexican-Americans that experienced a period of resurgence during the Mexican-American Movement of the 1960s, the meaning of a Mexican-American protagonist as it was previously known on the screen morphed. Valens represents neither the gangster nor the greaser image on the screen. Instead, Váldez sketched the image of a Mexican-American star with a unique pre-Columbian history. This technique reveals that while the biopic is mostly assimilationist, Váldez imbues it with Mexican-American elements that show the musical artist as reinventing the paradigmatic Hollywood image-crafting of this ethnicity. Rather than being a male buffoon, gangster, or greaser, Ritchie Valens proves to be an

iconic figure in the history of rock 'n' roll. A shift toward acknowledging the history of Chicana/os[5] in biopics becomes apparent in *La Bamba.*

In *La Bamba,* when Bob takes Ritchie to a brothel, Mexico is depicted as a place of depravity, replete with prostitutes, alcoholism, and drugs. Bob assures Ritchie to have a physical encounter with one of the women. This scene is representative of how members of the U.S. mainstream viewed Mexico during the 1980s, the decade when *La Bamba* was produced and released. Distorted cultural depictions of the country were only perpetuated. The brothel is a microcosm that falsely represents Mexico without taking into account its rich, diverse heritage and constituents. In a perpetually shadowy atmosphere, the Mexican women are dressed in neon colors, adding to the narrative of Mexico being an exotic place and a contrast to the mainstream U.S. One of the women offers her services to Valens while she is clearly inebriated. As is shown in this scene, Mexico is depicted as a place of gloom and corruption. Assimilation into the U.S. mainstream, then, offers him salvation in the biopic.

In Film Studies, the role that the screenplay occupies in the filmmaking process sometimes has been dismissed, undervalued, and overlooked. Luis Váldez, the screenplay writer of *La Bamba,* created a loosely-based account of Ritchie Valens' life. Rather than crafting a historically accurate portrayal of his life, Váldez crafted an on-screen Valens that conformed to budget constraints, Hollywood spectatorship expectations, and a mainstream entertainment value. Because of this truth deviation, an understanding of how Váldez crafted Mexican-American identity in the screenplay becomes pivotal. Since Váldez does not have an accurate

[5] "Chicana/o" is another term for "Mexican-American," but this term is more politically-charged, recognizing a shared heritage and history particular to this demographic.

portrayal of Valens' life, he must resort to his own understanding of what it means to be Mexican-American. As this study has mentioned, he relied on his own life as a Mexican-American to craft a cinematic portrayal of the phenomenon of Mexican-Americanness. Sometimes the original elements of the screenplay do not get included in the filmic version. In order to understand the portrayal of Mexican-American identity, the method of crafting Ritchie Valens' life must be taken into account. Rather than showing the historical authenticity of his life, the goal of entertaining Hollywood spectators becomes the end goal.

Emphasizing the importance of intertextuality, Jack Boozer describes the impact that the screenplay has on studies of film adaptation (1). Often neglected in the area of Film Studies, the screenplay plays a crucial role and first step in understanding ethnic cinematic representation. In this particular study, the importance of the screenplay as an influence on the final cinematic production must be underscored because Váldez did not put together a film in a vacuum, separated from any personal or outside influences. These influences shaped the written text that evolved into the 1987 biopic.

In *La Bamba*, an interesting avenue to explore is Luis Váldez's concurrent role as the screenwriter and director. In the other biographical films considered in this study, the screenwriter and the director are two different people with potentially diverging artistic visions. In such a situation, because the director makes the final cuts determining which scenes from the screenplay will be shown in the film, the content of the script will ultimately be altered. As has been previously expressed, Váldez turned to the Mexican-American identity that was relevant to his own life. Because he had a difficult time gathering information from Valens'

family members, Váldez instead opted to incorporate aspects of his border identity that were relevant to him, such as elements of spirituality and his Aztec roots.

La Bamba offers a glimpse into the heritage of Mexican-American identity while also conforming to the expectations of a mainstream audience. From an assimilationist perspective, the film appeals to a white mainstream sensibility. Ritchie Valens is shown as being culturally whitened in order to conform to the dominant spectatorship in the United States. Valens represents a successful Chicano in contrast to his brother, Bob, who embodies many Hispanic stereotypes in the biopic. Rather than showing historical accuracy, the film shows aspects of Valens' life in a sensationalized manner.

In contrast to *La Bamba, Selena* shows the in-betweenness of Mexican American identity as a Tejano musician. Her career as a musician offered an opportunity for her to show that she achieved stardom by embracing the numerous contours of Mexican-American identity, without having to favor one aspect of her identity over the other.

To date, as shown in the biographical film, Selena Quintanilla Perez remains the highest-grossing Latin music female musician of all time. The youngest of three, she was born in Lake Jackson, Texas, on April 16, 1971. Like Ritchie Valens, Selena's musical talents were nurtured from a young age. While Selena was the lead singer, her brother A.B. played the bass guitar, and her sister Suzette kept the rhythm on the drums. Two decades later, in 1994, Selena Quintanilla won a Grammy for her album *Selena Live!* She became the first woman in the Tejano genre to accomplish such a feat.

A certain kind of Mexican-American female identity emerges in the biopic *Selena,* offering a newfound portrayal of Latinas in the film industry. The construction of Latina women

up until that point had been crafted under the false assumption that an essentialist form of feminine *Latinidad* existed. This type of *Latinidad* has been portrayed in such a way that womanhood is crafted in a stereotypical way or through roles prescribed by a patriarchal culture. For example, the female harlot and the female clown have been identified by Ramírez-Berg as recurring Latina images in cinema. Even in recent Netflix series, for example, Latinas continue to be cast as maids, such as in *Devious Maids*, a series that started in 2013 and ended in 2016. Additionally, from a historical perspective, film has portrayed women as being in "the traditional trappings of femininity—fashion, motherhood, beauty, morality, and heterosexuality," according to Messner, Dunbar, and Hunt (380). These enduring interpretations of what it means to be a Latina woman have dominated filmic narratives for decades. These repeated images of Latina women have gone unchallenged and uncontested, fossilizing the notion that these portrayals define Latina womanhood.

Deborah Paredez has coined the term *Selenidad,* which she defines as "the dynamic and vibrant afterlife of the Latina superstar" (xii). Selena shattered gender expectations and gave visibility to Latinas during her lifetime and posthumously. In reference to this "alternative social subject," Selena helped reformulate a unique vision of what it meant to be Latina in a traditionally male-dominated arena.

Director Gregory Nava shows in the eponymous biopic that Selena forged her own identity regardless of expectations imposed on her. In 1997, however, the biographical film *Selena* demonstrated another dimension of Mexican-American identity that had not been previously depicted in cinema. The biopic succeeds in highlighting aspects of her life, while also starting a trend of Latina body aesthetics. Rather than abiding by Hollywood standards of

beauty, *Selena* redefined beauty on the screen. As this film shows, Selena, one of the most prolific Tejano singers of all time, transformed Hispanic *Latinidad* by becoming a successful female in a traditionally male-dominated musical genre. Her mere entrance into the Tejano music genre redefined not only this style of music, but it also reconstructed the image of the Latina performer. Also, a successful businesswoman, her love of fashion led her to create her own clothing line. Selena deviated from the traditional constructs of femininity by showing off her body. By reclaiming the Latina body, the legitimacy of her sexuality was placed at the forefront of the Latina sphere.

Presenting an alternative cinematic depiction of a Mexican-American woman, Selena helps formulate a unique vision of what it means to be Latina: a woman who is not afraid to express her sexuality through her performances in which her eroticism helps her deviate from her portrayal as a saintly persona; Sigmund Freud was the first to identify the psychoanalytic notion of the Madonna/Whore dichotomy (Freud 1925). His perspective has helped contextualize the modern-day Hollywood depictions of women. To give more context, in the Mexican-American arena, women have been reduced to unidimensional filmic portrayals of being oversexualized or sexually innocent. The camera in *Selena* captures close-ups of her body, particularly her curvaceous features. In one scene, we see that as Selena comes of age, she desires to show off her body by wearing revealing assimilationist outfits. Selena challenges a patriarchal society that tries to dictate how a Mexican-American woman *should* act and what her life goals *should* be. Instead of following the traditional gender roles of Mexican-American females, she proves that she can carve out her own destiny by deviating from the cultural codes that have been prescribed for her.

In terms of Mexican-American identity, the biopic reconfigured Latina womanhood. The film goes on to show that Selena Quintanilla, as portrayed by Jennifer López, completely shattered patriarchal norms by asserting her independence in a culture that had traditionally privileged men. Her vocal talents equipped her with what she needed in order to be a steward of her own life. Gloria Anzaldúa in *Borderlands: La Frontera* encapsulates this patriarchal notion with religious roots that permeates Mexican and Mexican-American culture:

> The culture expects women to show greater acceptance of, and commitment to, the value system than men. The culture and the Church insist that women are subservient to males. If a woman rebels, she is a *mujer mala.* If a woman doesn't renounce herself in favor of a male, she is selfish. If a woman remains a virgin until she marries, she is a good woman. (39)

This deep-rooted belief of men as the definers of culture is seen in at the beginning of the film. Selena's mother says, "Tejano music is all men. Women are not successful." Because of the success she amassed in her lifetime, Selena proved that she would not be constricted by a hierarchy of system and power with roots in her Mexican heritage. In fact, she paved the way for future Latina crossover figures because she gave visibility to Mexican-American women in popular culture. Selena became the best-selling Tejana singer of all time and reached a level of success unsurpassed by her male counterparts. In addition to redefining gender norms by becoming a breadwinner in her family, Selena represented a bicultural duality that had not been acknowledged in popular culture. Because Selena shattered traditional expectations of femininity, she became arguably the most successful Tejano singer that ever lived. As evidenced through the events of her life, she achieved a level of success that defied cultural and societal

expectations. Selena Quintanilla achieved an inter-Latino popularity during the course of her brief lifetime.

Lastly, we see Selena expressing confidence in showing off her body in the scene where she first wears the bustier she designed with her mother. Selena represents a successful, independent, and sexually liberated Chicana. The image of an empowered Latina ruptures with the traditional Hollywood images of "harlot, female clown, and dark lady" (Ramírez-Berg 66) conceptualization of *Latinidad*. Rather than being portrayed as a submissive woman or one who uses her sexuality to lure others, she is depicted as an independent and sexually-liberated Chicana. In sum, Selena challenges a patriarchal society that tries to dictate how she should act and what her life goals should be as a Mexican-American woman. Instead of following the traditional gender roles of females, she proves that she can be successful in her career.

Jennifer López, raised in the Bronx by Puerto Rican parents, was a different "kind" of Hispanic than Selena, a Mexican-American born and raised in Texas. She bridged this divide in *Latinidad* by focusing on her shared physical attributes with the Tejano superstar rather than relying on ethnic commonalities. As a result, her physique became an ethnic signifier of Mexican-American identity. Rather than subscribing to Anglo beauty ideals of having a thin frame, López capitalized on the physical features she shared with the Tejano singer. In interview after interview, López proudly proclaimed that her physical attributes were naturally endowed, not surgically enhanced.

As a result of the portrayal of a new Latina, having a well-endowed posterior entered the mainstream as a valid ideal of beauty. Frances Negrón-Muntaner in "Jennifer's Butt" asserts that:

> the big rear ends acts both as an identification site for Latinas to reclaim their beauty and a "compensatory fantasy" for a whole community. Insisting to write or talk about big butts is ultimately a response to the pain of being ignored, thought of as ugly, treated as low yet surviving—even thriving. (192)

After Jennifer López played the part of Selena, being Latina became equated with having a well-endowed bottom. Jennifer López and Selena alike share a similar physique, which contributes to a specific crafting of the Tejana singer in the biopic. The camera in *Selena* captures close-ups of her body, particularly her curvaceous features. Frances Negrón-Muntaner states: "Jennifer López's close identification with Selena seemed not only based on their parallel crossover successes but on a common experience of having a similar build, a body generally considered abject by American standards of beauty and propriety" (184-185). López channels not only Selena's spirit in the biopic, but she also possesses a similar physique as the deceased artist. Her role as Selena begins a discussion of the physical features that are prized by the North American film industry and attributed as constituting the mainstream ideal of beauty. Because this collective group is viewed as homogenized, this concept of *Latinidad* is not cinematically depicted as existing on various spectrums.

In the *Selena* biopic, the Spanish language becomes "performed" in such a way that it captures the particularities of Mexican-American Spanish. Jennifer López, a Hispanic of Puerto Rican descent, morphed her Puerto Rican Spanish language variety into a Tejano-inflected Spanish language variety in order to authentically portray Selena Quintanilla Pérez. While Puerto Rican Spanish is characterized by syllable final -/s/, Mexican-American Spanish maintains syllable final -/s/.

The following phonetic transcription shows how Jennifer López, a Hispanic of Puerto Rican descent, would most naturally pronounce the following with her Puerto Rican variety of Spanish:

Me siento muy orgullosa de estar aquí con todos ustedes. (*Selena,* 1:04:34-1:04:37)

[me ˈsjɛ̃n̪.to. mwi.or .ɣu.ˈʝo.sa. ðɛs.ˈtaɾ a.ˈki. kõn̪ ˈto.ðoh uh.ˈte.ðeh]

López makes Selena's portrayal as a Mexican-American authentic by pronouncing the /s/ sounds. The following phonetic transcription shows how Jennifer López "performs" Mexican-American Spanish:

Me siento muy orgullosa de estar aquí con todos ustedes. (*Selena,* 1:04:34-1:04:37)

[me ˈsjɛ̃n̪.to mwi. oɾ.ɣu.ˈʝo.sa ðɛs.ˈtaɾ a.ˈki. kõn̪ ˈto.ðos us.ˈte.ðes]

As is evident from the example, López adopts Selena's actual speech patterns. This type of impersonation is so authentic that it metaphorically revives Selena from the dead. Even though López is Puerto Rican, the elements of Mexican-American Spanish appear in her rendition of the Tejano superstar. *Selena* remapped Mexican-American identity in the North American film industry, highlighting a different spectrum of what it means to be Latina/o in the United States. Before Selena made Tejano music famous on a national scale, it was looked down upon by constituents of the mainstream. Deborah Paredez explains that the dominant culture perceived "Tejano-style cumbias…as derivative pop schlock with a lower-class country twang" (161). The biofilm along with Selena's own popularity gave validity to a musical genre that had been previously associated with a lower-class sensibility.

The portrayal of these Latina/o icons cannot be blurred with reality, but an analysis of how the singers were illustrated offers an insight into the multifaceted portrayal of *Latinidad*. Even though a tendency might exist to accept every element unraveling on the screen as an

absolute truth, fiction often intermingles with facts in the final depiction of *Latinidad* in a cinematographic biographical film. In "Popular music history on screen: the pop/rock biopic," Ian Inglis defines music biographical films as "a film which purports to tell, in part or in full, the biography of a musical performer (living or dead) and which contains a significant amount of his or her music" (77). In their portrayals of the protagonists, actors Jennifer López and Lou Diamond Phillips refashion the roles of Latino/as in the North American film industry. Jennifer López, true to the life of Selena Quintanilla, characterizes a different type of womanhood that showcases the musical talent and importance of Mexican-American identity in the brief life of the Tejana star. In the same vein, Lou Diamond Philips helped craft the image of Ritchie Valens, the "father" of Mexican-American rock and paradigm shifter in the genre. The portrayal of Selena and Ritchie Valens offer a countervision of *Latinidad* as shattering the norm; both challenged the dominant portrayals of Latinas/os in film, offering a nuanced portrayal of *Latinidad* in the process.

The biopics in this chapter contribute to a new vision in the North American film industry. More specifically, the focus is on the process of challenging well-known, recurring tropes in Mexican-American biographical films while recognizing that certain Latin stereotypes are still being manifested cinematographically; the study centers on elements of exclusion, omission, and fictionalization; gender; the portrayal of the Spanish language; cinematic elements, casting of protagonists, and how the director as auteur constructs Latina/o images. Though some of these elements apply across fields, the study looks at how it relates to *Latinidad* directly.

The alternative depictions of Mexican-American/a cultural identity in cinema resulted from the Mexican-American Movement of the 1960s, although it has been argued that filmic

representations of Mexican-Americans began before this historical event. With the advent of moving pictures came the negative representations of Mexican-Americans in which they were racialized as the Other. For example, they typically appeared as a social problem in Westerns through their manifestation on the screen as bandits. Angharad N. Valdivia in *Latina/os and the Media* notes that the modern-day depiction of the Latino as criminal has its roots in early representations of bandidos, which she explains were shown as threatening "the calm and repose of an otherwise civilized setting" (86). The members of the dominant culture served as contrasts to these characters sketched in a barbaric fashion, invading the countryside and invading those in power.

Before delving into the concept of how North American film depictions of Selena Quintanilla and Ritchie Valens redesigned *Latinidad*, it is useful to place the history of Latina/o stereotypes in film. Rosa Linda Fregoso contends that Mexican-Americans and Chicanas, due to a flawed discourse of racism, have been portrayed as subjugated beings in film (2). Charles Ramírez-Berg in *Latino Images in Film: Stereotypes, Subversion, and Resistance* identifies six basic Latino stereotypes that have prevailed in the history of U.S. cinema: "el bandido, the harlot, the male buffoon, the female clown, the Latin lover, and the dark lady" (66). He subsequently explains that historically speaking, the protagonist has been the white hero while other ethnicities have been deemed as inferior (67). In *Selena* and *La Bamba*, some of these stereotypes reappear, but more importantly, Mexican-American protagonists are endowed with positive characteristics in these cinematographic creations. In both biopics, the protagonists are successful Chicana/os with a plot that surrounds their lives and their rise to stardom. Even though Selena Quintanilla and Ritchie Valens are members of the working-class, they use their

talent in order to prove that they are equally as capable of achieving success as their Anglo counterparts. Beyond the recurring Latino stereotypes – the bandit, the Latin lover, and the female harlot – this study assesses the competing narratives of *Latinidad* presented in the music-centered biographical films *La Bamba* and *Selena***.** As has been previously mentioned, *La Bamba* incorporates an assimilationist point of Mexican-American identity while *Selena* includes a configuration of identity that encourages the preservation of her ethnic heritage.

Any biographical film can have its antecedents in other media before it comes to fruition and is displayed on the big screen. George Custen defines a biographical film as "one that depicts the life of a person, past or present" (5). Movies containing recreations from the past are the earliest genres of the cinema (5). With each generation, the definition of the biographical films seems to change not just because the genre itself is changed, but because "certain careers and types of people become the prime focus of public curiosity in each generation" (Custen 7). Although depictions of Mexican-Americans/as have existed arguably since the beginning of moving pictures, their representations have changed in recent decades, fueled in part by the identity politics of the Mexican-American Movement and later blossoming in the Decade of the Hispanic in the 1990s. Ritchie Valens became known as an important figure in rock 'n' roll, while Selena became successful in the genre of Tejano music. The protagonists in these biopics sparked curiosity from the public in the 1980s and 1990s. This was indicative of how perceptions of Latina/os were shifting in the North American film industry based on society's newfound interest in Mexican-American musical artists. In other words, filmic narratives reflect social change.

In contrast to other films put forth by the North American film industry, biopics commonly begin with written or spoken assertions about the events that are about to unfold (Custen 8). This signifies that the events that are to about unfold on the screen contain elements of truth in them. Elements of fact and fiction merge in order to create films that are classified as biopics. It is important to explore the elements that become fictionalized in the recreation of a filmic biography and what effect, if any, this has on the portrayal Latina/o identity. As far as the elements of authenticity and fictionalization are concerned in *La Bamba* and *Selena,* the directors rely on varying levels of recollections of family members for the final illustration of the Latina/o protagonist on the screen. Luis Váldez as director and screenwriter of *La Bamba* created a highly-fictionalized account of Ritchie Valens with minimal input from the Valens family, whereas Gregory Nava sketched a more authentic depiction of Selena's life based on recollections from her father, Abraham Quintanilla. Recollections of people who were part of these iconic Latina/os' lives, as well as how these recollections were molded in order to create the protagonists in these Latino-centric films, became central in piecing together the narratives of Mexican-American identity in these biopics.

La Bamba and *Selena* fall under the category of Chicana/o biopics. Not only are the protagonists of these films Mexican-American, but the filmmakers themselves hail from the same ethnic background. In *Mexican-Americans and Film,* Chon Noriega recognizes the importance of Mexican-American/a filmmakers in the process of creating a cinematographic work of art: "[A Mexican-American film is a] film (or video) by and about Mexican-Americans. The word "by" is taken to mean that the writer, producer, or director is Mexican-American" (xix). According to her definition, those who participate in the production process

are just as significant as the configurations of identity that appear in film. In this chapter, director Luis Váldez of *La Bamba* and Gregory Nava of *Selena* are both Mexican-Americans who helped sketch the filmic representation of other Mexican-Americans. As the sons of Mexican parents, Váldez was born in Delano, California, while Nava was born in San Diego. It is interesting to keep in mind their cultural background when examining how they decided to configure Mexican-American identity in their respective films. Luis Valdez's own vantage point as a Mexican-America informed the final image of Mexican-Americanness while Gregory Nava inserted his own ethnic heritage.

Mexican-American identity is illustrated as family-centered in the Selena biographical film. Chuck Kleinhaus notes that a distinguishing feature of biofilm is the fact that family plays a central role in the plot (28). Latinos place more emphasis on the community than on the individual, so making the family a primary unit of the biopic *Selena* is representative of this trend among Chicana/os. Instead of hailing from an individually-oriented background, Selena's Mexican heritage teaches her the importance of the community in her life and the role that it played in her success as a Latina artist. From a young age, her father taught her songs from the 1950s, and he put together a band comprised of his children, A.B., Suzette, and Selena. They worked collectively in order to attain success in the musical arena. Abraham, Selena's father, could have chosen to focus on honing his daughter's musical talent exclusively. Instead, he was emotionally and financially invested in Selena, his last-born.

The biopic *La Bamba* expresses this same vantage point of family playing an important role in the identity of the protagonist. When Bob Keane, president of the record label Del-Fi record, visits Ritchie Valens at his home to offer him a record deal, he tells him that he wants to

record his music. When Ritchie asks him about his band, and Keane remarks that he does not want to record the band members. Keane asks him, “What is more important? Your friends or your music?” Ritchie responds, “My family.” His answer substantiates Kleinhaus’ observation about the importance of family in Mexican-American culture. Valens, true to the heritage of Mexican-Americans, is shown to prioritize his family. In sum, the importance of family is sketched successfully in *Selena* as well as in *La Bamba* as a trait of *Latinidad*.

In the *Selena* biographical film, screenwriter and director Gregory Nava aimed to portray an authentic likeness of the Tejano superstar by focusing on the historical accuracy of her life. By doing this, he sketched the life as it was actually lived by a Mexican-American singer rather than focusing on the Latina/o as typically sketched by a formulaic film industry code. In addition to revealing her personality and life as it really was, Nava also focused on re-creating significant moments in the singer’s career.

The movie’s opening scene shows a re-enactment of Selena’s performance at the Alamodome in San Antonio, which was actually filmed at the Houston Astrodome. Every detail of this final performance was meticulously crafted. For example, exceptional care was taken to preserve the event as it really was when Selena, played by Jennifer López, makes her entrance at the Alamodome.

Also, the end of the film depicts a reenactment of Selena’s murder. Nava desired to sketch the life of a “real human being...not an idealized version of Selena” according to an interview he gave with Elaine Liner. Nava encountered resistance from Selena’s family in the depiction of Selena’s elopement with Chris Perez. In the interview with Liner, Nava explains that "A big thing for me was telling the love story the way that it really happened - with Abe

[Selena's father] yelling at Selena on the bus and firing Chris. I felt it really needed to be done in the movie. But they [her family] said, `We can't show that. She's a role model to the youth" (*Liner,* par. 9). While these best practices in film do not contribute directly to the theme of *Latinidad*, it is essential to accurately portray these individuals' lives in order to fully understand the importance of ethnic heritage in these films.

Nava's credentials as a Mexican-American add a dimension of authenticity to *Selena.* His vantage point inverts the "created in the U.S. by non-Latinos" notion of *Latinidad* because he is able to imbue the biographical film with his firsthand experience as a Latino. Because he is of Mexican-American descent, he can create an image of a person from his heritage in a more humanized, inclusive way rather than relegating him to one of the prototypical images employed in the movie industry. Before *Selena*, Gregory Nava co-wrote *El Norte, Mi América,* among other films, which explore some of the themes that appear in the biopic of the Tejano singer. Themes explored in these films include the struggles of crossing the border and having to reconcile one's ethnic identity as immigrants residing in the United States. Even though he succeeds in offering more heterogeneous portrayals of Mexican-Americans by showing them as characters with complex personalities from disadvantaged backgrounds who were neither limited by financial constraints nor were they sketched cinematically as bandits or gangsters. The final product resulted in illustrating Ritchie Valens and Selena as legends, with parts of their lives embellished in order to follow a Hollywood code that yielded profitable box office returns.

Selena as a cinematic sketch is truly an entanglement of various components. Stephen Heath in *Questions of Cinema* asks the following: "What is film, in fact, but an elaborate time machine, a tangle of memories and times successfully rewound in the narrative as the order of

the continuous time of the film?" (132). In the opening scene of *Selena*, the audience is transported to Selena's last concert at the Houston Astrodome in 1995. The "tangle of memories" that resulted in the cinematic work of art Selena had its roots in the memories of Selena's father and the interpretation of those memories by the director Gregory Nava. Abraham Quintanilla, Selena's father and producer of the biopic, functions as the keeper of her memory. This helped him weave his particular recollections that contributed to the finished product of his daughter's biographical film. Although he wanted to act as a revisionist historian by not including the elopement of his daughter in the film, director Gregory Nava convinced him to do so in order to remain faithful to the life story of his daughter. Consequently, the finished product became an amalgamation of various memories, with some memories taking precedence over others. As has been previously mentioned, while historical accuracy does not automatically contribute to *Latinidad*, the real-life portrayals of Mexican-Americans highlight the importance of cultural heritage as it really appeared in the lives of various people.

In *La Bamba*, which is a highly fictionalized biopic, director Luis Váldez pieces together events in helping to produce the biographical film. He offers a unique vantage point as a director because he recognized "image-making…[as] an important arena of cultural contestation" (Fregoso 6). Furthermore, Váldez derived meaning for Mexican-American identity by rejecting a Eurocentric heritage that prevailed in mainstream America. Known for his origins in *El Teatro Campesino*, his viewpoint of Latinos in the North American film industry is unique because he recognizes the mestizo heritage has been historically invisible in the filmic representations of Mexican-Americans' lives.

Some scholars affirm that no authentic replication of a historical event can transpire because history consists of discursive practices with origins in a particular moment in time. Hayden White in *Tropics of Discourse* states the following:

> No history, visual or verbal, 'mirrors' all or even the greater parts of the events or scenes of which it purports to be an account, and this is true of even of the most narrowly restricted 'micro history.' Every written history is a product of processes of condensation, displacement, symbolization, and qualification exactly like those used in the production of filmed representation. It is only the medium that differs, not the way in which the messages are produced (1194).

Similarly, numerous scenes depicting "this tangle of memories and times" in *La Bamba* paint the portrait of *Latinidad* as it has been constructed from the vantage point of Hollywood filmmakers. They have found a way to "condense" or displace the Latina/o image. Furthermore, we see the progression of his relationship with Donna. Rather than appearing as the Other, Valens becomes a member of the dominant discourse, steering the course of his own destiny by producing chart-topping singles. Ritchie Valens took a Mexican-based folksong and imbued it with U.S. mainstream appeal by transforming it into a rock 'n' roll hit. He infused the sounds of rock with a Latino sound in order to produce his best-selling hit "La Bamba." This gave the song transnational appeal because of the musically-depicted border. With hints of rock 'n' roll, a genre with U.S. roots, and lyrics in Spanish, "La Bamba" demonstrated the effects of colliding borders: new ever-shifting identities and the importance to recognize this shifting nature of *Latinidad*.

The use of these elements proves that filmmakers know how to garner the attention of a mainstream audience. Fictionalization, then, is used as a way to color the biography of a person and give it appeal it otherwise might not have. Lastly, Lou Diamond Phillips had to lip-sync the songs in the biopic. This was a way for the actual voice of the singer to be included in the cinematic works of art. Due to a poetic license typical of the North American film industry machine, *La Bamba* contains elements of fiction in the biopic. Ritchie Valens scholar Beverly Mendheim pinpoints some of the embellished elements in the film:

> Ritchie was never a farmworker or migrant laborer: he did not go to Tijuana with his brother nor meet a curandero who gave him an amulet made of snakeskin; and he never sang Buddy Holly tunes in a country/western bar (139).

The use of these elements proves that filmmakers know how to attract the attention of a mainstream audience. Not only are elements of pre-Columbian roots apparent here, but Ritchie Valens is illustrated as having purportedly mingled with Buddy Holly, an icon with whom the mainstream audience could identify. By linking him with a recognized rock 'n' roll figure in popular culture, the audience members can associate him with the icon for whom "American Pie" was written. This song was written as a tribute to Holly after the plane crash that claimed his life on February 3, 1959, which has come to be known as "the day the music died".

In the biopic *La Bamba,* Luis Váldez juxtaposes two singers who did not interact in real life, but by including Holly, he legitimates Valens' life in the eyes of the audience. Fictionalization, then, is used as a tool to color the biography of a person, imbuing it with appeal it otherwise might not have, as the subject is able to identify with the historical event. Migrant labor and *curanderismo* become defining elements of how Chicana/o identity appeared at the time. This showed a need

to show *Latinidad* from the perspective of Latina/os rather than through the perspective of non-Latina/os ascribing their own interpretation to an identity other than their own.

The topic of barrio identity arises in *La Bamba,* where Bob represents barrio identity in contrast to Ritchie, a Mexican-American who has embraced U.S. mainstream identity instead. Ritchie, as portrayed in the biopic, follows the established paradigms of success as set forth by the mainstream. Whether it was intentional or not by the director, director Váldez cast Lou Diamond Phillips as the lead. In the film, he speaks "perfect" English, which makes him seem more "American" by mainstream standards than his brother, Bob. Bob consistently punctuates his speech with barrio slang, also known as Mexican-American Caló, with words like *carnal, carnalito,* and *ese.* Of the two brothers, he is perceived as less successful because of his barrio identity. Furthermore, he often wears leather jackets and torn jeans. On the other hand, Ritchie embodies success with his meticulously pressed clothing. Wardrobe and speech patterns become signifiers of Mexican-American identity in the cinematic depiction of these two brothers, offering two contrasting views of what it means to be Mexican-American and a sell-out.

In one scene of *La Bamba,* when Bob Keane is conversing with the KFWB radio host, they discuss that Ritchie won't be a barrio boy for long. Implicit in this conversation is that he must purge himself of his barrio identity in order to achieve social mobility. As is evident in the following scene, negative connotations are ascribed to people who are from the *barrio:*

KFWB RADIO HOST: He's one of those barrio kids from the valley.

KEANE: Not for long (*La Bamba*, 56:43-56:45).

In order for Valens to achieve mainstream success, he must purge himself of a *barrio* identity shown by Bob's Mexican-Americanness. As portrayed in the biopic, Bob's identity will relegate

him to a life of poverty because he refuses to accept and enter the mainstream. To reiterate previous points, he speaks in a certain way, wears certain clothes, and participates in certain activities that categorize him as the stereotypical and less successful Mexican-American. In order for Valens to succeed, he must literally and figuratively "leave" the *barrio.*

The concept of Anglo-Americans as the favored moviegoers rather than Latina/os and other ethnicities becomes evident in *La Bamba.* By modifying his name to the Americanized version, Keane imposed a name that would appeal to an English-speaking audience, erasing traces of Ritchie's identity from public space. The name Valens allowed him to "pass" as white, thus broadening his appeal to the spectators with the most financial power. Rather than readily being accepted into pop culture as they were, Mexican-Americans were adapted to attract a white audience, discounting Latina/o audiences already in the United States. The importance of a certain kind of spectatorship influences the way the biopic unravels on the screen, hindering Mexican-American from being fully and accurately depicted.

An inextricable link exists between Spanish and Mexican-American identity in *La Bamba* and *Selena.* In 1987, Los Lobos' rendition of "La Bamba" stayed at the top of the Billboard charts for 100 weeks. "La Bamba" became the only song in a language other than English to reach the top of the charts in the United States. Traditionally a Mexican folk song, Ritchie Valens infused the traditional song with rock elements, thus characterizing *Latinidad* as a more marketable notion. In the Valens biopic, he tells his manager, Bob Keane, that he wants to record a song in Spanish and his boss' feelings toward singing in Spanish are made manifest in the following scene:

BOB KEANE: We still need another single to go along with Donna. How about Suzie?

RITCHIE: How about La Bamba?

BOB KEANE: La Bamba? It's not rock 'n' roll.

RITCHIE: It is the way I play it.

BOB KEANE: No, no, no, no. It's a folk song. I don't want to offend anybody, okay? Besides, it's in Spanish.

RITCHIE: That's how I want to sing it.

BOB KEANE: Rock 'n' roll in Spanish? You gotta be crazy. (*La Bamba,* 1:12:59-1:13:18)

Keane shows that the expected language of expression of rock 'n' roll is English. Unlike Valens, he could not even conceive of the genre being performed in Spanish.

The bilingual world in *Selena* represents a reality of Mexican-American culture in Texas. Language functions as an important element of the culture and identity in the phenomenon of Mexican-Americanness shown in *Selena.* Although Selena did not learn Spanish as a first language, she learned to sing in the language of her heritage. By doing so, she rendered visible an important part of her heritage and thus legitimized it as part of Chicana identity. *Latinidad* in the United States is not contingent upon the ability to speak Spanish. Not proficient in the Spanish language, Selena Quintanilla situated herself as an important Latina/o role model. *Selena* highlights the in-betweenness of the Tejano genre superstar's Mexican-American identity. Even though she grew up speaking English, she learned Spanish phonetically in order to sing to the people of her heritage. Abraham Quintanilla is shown instilling this concept in his daughter at an early age: "I'm an American. You're an American. I like doo-wop. You like Donna Summer. But you're also Mexican, deep down inside and that's a

wonderful thing. You can't be anything if you don't know who you are." As a musician in his youth, Quintanilla faced ridicule for not being able to perform in Spanish. During that time period, not knowing Spanish was seen as a rejection of ethnic origin and inability to connect with other members of his community. Quintanilla wanted Selena to learn from his mistake by embracing her identity as a Spanish language performer. In Gloria Anzaldúa's seminal work on border identity, she states, "Ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity--I am my language. Until I can take pride in my language, I cannot take pride in myself" (81). She echoes the sentiments of other Mexican-Americans toward kinship and the Spanish language. This same perspective is held by Abraham, Selena's father, in the biopic. His pride in Spanish-language fluency forms a pivotal component of his Mexican-American identity. He not only describes the importance of being able to speak Spanish "perfectly" to an audience, but he also passes on the language of his heritage by teaching his daughter to sing in Spanish.

Another important component of the bilingual environment is the cultural composition of Chicana/os. In one scene in the movie *Selena*, Abraham Quintanilla expresses the cultural ambivalence of Mexican-American identity in a conversation with Selena and A.B.:

SELENA: Hello?! We're Mexican!

DAD: No, we are Mexican-Americans! They don't like Mexican-Americans.

ABE: No, it's all the same…

DAD: They can be mean. They can tear us apart over there. Selena's Spanish is…

SELENA: What about This Spanish? I've been singing in Spanish for ten years. It's perfect.

DAD: Singing, yes, but when you speak it, you speak it a little funny...I have been there. You've got to speak perfectly or the press will eat you up, spit you out alive--I've seen them do it.

SELENA: Oh, Dad, you're overreacting again…

ABE: Dad, the music will speak for itself, Dad.

DAD: Listen, being Mexican-American is tough. Anglos jump all over you if you don't speak English perfectly. Mexicans jump all over you if you don't speak Spanish perfectly. We've got to be twice as perfect as anybody else. [Abe and Selena laugh.] Why are you laughing? What's so funny? I am serious...Our family has been here for centuries, yet they treat us as if we just swam across the Rio Grande. (*Selena*, 58:20-59:09)

Like *Selena*, *La Bamba* reveals the story of how Ritchie Valens carved out his place in popular culture by redefining a genre with Latina/o elements and then placing it at the center of the mainstream. Because the musical genre of rock and roll was formerly represented by figures such as Elvis, Ritchie Valens imbued the musical category with a newfound meaning by placing a formerly invisible ethnicity, which is still arguably invisible or misrepresented in the film industry, at the forefront of the North American film industry. He performed "La Bamba," a Spanish-language song; the fact that such a song became a best-seller reflected the Latino demographics evident in the United States but that formerly had gone unrecognized. A new kind of discourse was being created to combat the hegemonic nature of the North American film industry. In other words, non-whites claimed a sense of legitimacy by inserting themselves in the North American film industry in ways that deviated from previous Latino stereotypes and

assimilated to white ones. Beverly Mendheim states that "Ritchie was the essential beginning of a movement in rock music that remained unrecognized by the rest of the country" (124). The Ritchie Valens biographical film helped insert Mexican-Americans in the center stage of Americana in the 1980s and thus validated their place in the history of the United States. He paved the way for future Latina/o musicians to receive acclaim, such as Selena and Ricky Martin in the 1990s.

As is evident in the biopic *La Bamba*, "La Bamba" became the first song to cross over to the mainstream rock and roll audience. Beverly Mendheim states that Ritchie Valens' memory lives on in the Southwest, particularly in Southern California (124). His recording of "La Bamba" endowed him with a new level of fame and legitimized the Latino presence in the music industry (124). Members of the music industry learned that there were Latino music consumers in the mainstream. In the words of Fregoso, "La Bamba...convinced the dominant industry of the profitability of the Latino market and the viability of Latino themes for the mainstream audience" (39). Mexican-Americans would not only be able to express themselves in music and film but now there was also a recognized need for these modes of expression as a business.

In reference to bicultural identity among Chicanas, the bilingual world in Selena represents a reality of Mexican-American culture in Texas. Language as part of one's heritage becomes a crucial element of identity. Although Selena did not learn Spanish as a first language, she learned to sing in the language of her heritage. By doing so, she rendered visible an important part of her heritage and thus legitimized it as part of Chicana identity. Chicana/o identity, then, became legitimized by a white mainstream audience.

As this scene shows, Mexican-Americans constantly navigate intangible borders that have gone unrecognized by mainstream the North American film industry. Mexican-American identity proves emotionally exhausting because of the push/pull factors from both ends of the cultural spectrum. Regardless of the expectations placed on Selena's family by Anglos and Mexicans, she triumphs as a Tejano singer even though she does not conform to the expectations her father has for her. Furthermore, from a young age, Selena has learned from her father that even though she doesn't like Spanish, she has to sing to the people in her *corazón* if she wants to be successful:

> ABRAHAM: But you're also Mexican, deep inside and that's a wonderful thing. You can't be anything if you don't know who you are…
>
> SELENA: So what you're saying is I gotta learn how to sing this stuff. (*Selena,* 25:30-25:48)

This bicultural realm also manifests itself in the biographical film *La Bamba*. Ritchie Valens states, "If Nat King Cole can sing in Spanish, so can I, right?" He understands the importance of the Spanish language community in the Southwest. He then persuades Bob Keane to allow him to produce "La Bamba" in Spanish even though Keane does not believe this will appeal to a mainstream audience.

As this chapter has already mentioned, Gloria Anzaldúa underscores the inextricable link between language and identity. The characters of Selena and Ritchie Valens make Spanish a living language by using it as a vehicle in their musical works of art. Even though they were not native Spanish speakers, they realized the importance of reclaiming the language as part of their

identity. Selena reformulates *Latinidad* by demonstrating that she can still be Latina without being Spanish language proficient.

The act of casting Jennifer Lopez and Lou Diamond Phillips functioned as a border crossing in and of itself. Before their breakthrough roles in *La Bamba* and *Selena*, Lou Diamond Phillips and Jennifer López had previous acting experience in television programs. As a result of their performances in these musical biopics, they became well-known in the North American film industry. Prior to his breakthrough role in *La Bamba*, Phillips starred as a detective in *Miami Vice*. Jennifer López's most notable acting experience was on the television program *In Living Color* as a dancer.

The casting of characters in Latina/o biopics begins an interesting discussion about the crafting of images of this ethnicity. In *La Bamba*, Lou Diamond Phillips learned to lip-sync the recordings of Los Lobos while Jennifer López mastered the art of synchronizing her lips to those of the original recordings of Selena. While Phillips was not Spanish-language proficient, López was a native speaker of the language. An important point to note here is the importance of phenotype in casting actors to portray Latina/o roles. The process of casting a Latina/ for a role in the North American film industry reveals the preconceived notions that filmmakers have of what it means to be Latina/o. One of the most important components in casting these characters included how closely their phenotypes matched the physical attributes of the Latina/o singers they were portraying.

The very act of casting protagonists for each biopic shows the ambiguity of the definition of Latina/o. Jennifer López, an American of Puerto Rican descent, played the role of Selena while Lou Diamond Phillips, an American of Filipino and Native American descent, portrayed

the role of a Mexican-American rocker. In an interview for *Remezcla,* Lou Diamond Phillips summed up his feelings about his ethnicity: "... I feel incredibly fortunate that this ambiguous ethnicity allows me to do that, and to morph into whatever character that I'm representing" (*Erazo,* par. 10). In the production of *La Bamba,* the fact that Lou Diamond Phillips was not Latino proved irrelevant in the casting of the protagonist. Even though Phillips is of Filipino and Native American descent, he can "pass" for being Mexican-American because his physical description is the one most commonly associated with the depiction of Mexican-Americans in the film industry. *La Bamba* appropriates the concept of passing for another ethnicity and thus demonstrates the extent to which race is socially constructed in the United States and how Mexican-Americanness becomes a performance on the silver screen. Phillips, with his brown skin and indigenous features, phenotypically resembled Valens and was thus cast to play him in the biofilm. During the 1980s and 1990s, phenotype alone was permissible in denoting the authenticity of a character in biopics without taking into account the actor's ethnic heritage. This perception is something that changed in the past two decades and will be explored in subsequent chapters of this study.

As has been previously mentioned, *La Bamba* offers an assimilationist configuration of *Latinidad,* while *Selena* achieves a more hybrid approach to this phenomenon. Selena Quintanilla redefined traditional Latina womanhood by using her musical talent to assert her independence and identity while Ritchie Valens, the "father" of Mexican-American rock, emerged as a paradigm shifter in the genre of rock and roll by proving that he was capable of being successful in the popular culture mainstream. Thus, *Selena* and *La Bamba* offered a

countervision of *Latinidad* as crossover stars who challenged the dominant portrayals of Latinas/os in film, offering a multifaceted portrayal of *Latinidad* in the process.

Even though Selena died twenty-one years ago, she has been memorialized in the biographical film *Selena* by Gregory Nava. This biographical film chronicles the life of a Tejano crossover figure, Selena Quintanilla, who had to overcome cultural and socioeconomic barriers to pave her way as the most successful Tejano superstar. An artist from humble roots, she soared to the top of Tejano music charts during her lifetime. Similarly, Ritchie Valens died at the age of 17 in 1959. Both singers died at a young age, used Spanish to achieve the American Dream, became crossover sensations, and represented Mexican-American social mobility. The North American film industry recognizes the increasing number of Latinos/as in the United States. This is reflected in the surge of movies that depict the lives of Mexican-Americans that reshaped the course of Mexican-American/a history as we know it.

By placing these two Mexican-Americans at the center of these biopics and reflecting the importance of their heritage, Ritchie Valens and Selena are given their rightful prominence in Americana. In these two biographical films about Mexican-American musicians, filmmakers begin to show the heterogeneous nature of *Latinidad*. Although this phenomenon is distorted at times, these films play vital roles in any examination of Mexican-American biographical films. These films from the 1980s and the 1990s paved the way for heterogeneous depictions in more contemporary biopics, which will be explored in subsequent chapters.

CHAPTER III

LATINIDAD IN CÉSAR CHÁVEZ

While *La Bamba* demonstrates identity from an assimilationist perspective and *Selena* demonstrates the same phenomenon through the reclamation of a lost heritage, *César Chávez* reveals a present-day interest in the U.S./Mexico border by relating the story of a time period particularly relevant to Mexican-Americanness, the Chicano Movement, the time period from the 1960s to the 1970s characterized by a heightened demand for Mexican-American civil rights through ethnic solidarity and protests. In addition to showcasing the importance of the United Farm Workers during this time, the biographical film offers a glimpse into the concept of the authenticity of Mexican-American characters. This chapter aims to explore the manifestation of Mexican-Americanness through fidelity to the character being depicted, the ways that Mexican-American racialized stereotypes, and the manner that the Mexican-American sketch as it is conveyed by a non-Mexican base becomes idealized in a film produced by a Mexican-based studio.

Various books have been written about the life of César Chávez, but in 2014, decades after his peaceful demonstrations in the 1960s and 1970s, a filmic representation of his life finally emerged. Camilla Fojas explains that the *César Chávez* biopic appears in the present-day because of its relevance to contemporary border issues (2). Decades after the Chicano Movement, the issue of migrant laborers' working conditions still proves relevant in the United States. *César Chávez* sets a precedent not only within the genre of the biopic but also in the larger arena of Latina/o films. The importance of political organization offers a glimpse into a Latina/o microcosm that has not previously been explored on the screen in-depth. The importance of fighting for farm workers' basic human rights through labor unions becomes the

focal point, demonstrating the political relevancy of this topic in film. Today, more than forty years after Chávez led the fight for farm workers, the subject of the fight for humane working conditions of field laborers continues to be an issue. The behind-the-scenes aspect of migrant labor is transmitted to a wide audience, which contributes to the recrafting of the Mexican-American narrative in the United States.

César Chávez, as shown in the 2014 titular biopic, became a Latino icon through his advocacy for farm laborers in California. The inclusion of his story in the North American film industry in the eponymous biographical film of 2014, more than half a century after he founded the United Farm Workers, denotes not only the recognition of Latina/os as an important demographic in the United States but also recognizes the social factors that contribute to this growing trend in the production of biographical films. For example, the border has become a space of examining social justice, bringing the Chicanos/ Cultural Movements of the 1960s and 1970s to light. Tomas Ybarra-Frausto and Shifra Goldman identify two separate historical eras as constituting the "Chicano Period." The first commences in 1965 with the activism of the Farm Workers while the second begins in the mid-1970s and continues to the present day. Under the guidance of César Chávez, the United Farm Workers was a crucial organization during the first era of the Chicano Period. The biographical film in this chapter focuses on the developments during the first Mexican-American Period and the role that Chávez played in securing better working conditions for farm workers in California.

Not only was the Chicano Period highlighted in the Chávez biopic, but also the film presents an overall image of the Mexican-American in a positive light. Unlike the overly-sexualized Selena and the assimilationist Valens, this alternative cinematic depiction debunks previous stereotypical images that have been used to represent Mexican-Americans. In stark

contrast to stereotypes and a prevailing contemporary stereotype of the Latino as a gangster, the portrayal of César Chávez serves to illustrate the image of not only a non-violent Latino but a man who wanted to be an agent of change through nonviolent means. *César Chávez,* then, unlike aforementioned tropes, celebrates the diversity of the Latino experience in the United States rather than characterizing a Latino with the tropes that have become stereotypical of Mexican-Americans in film.

"The Mexican" has appeared as a rebel since Western films. Arthur Pettit describes how the depiction of Latina/os has often been associated with the image of the bandit in *Westerns in Images of Mexican Americans in Fiction and Film.* To add to this, Ramírez-Berg contends that the image of the Mexican bandido has evolved into two modern-day "incarnations" (68 in *Latino images in film).* The first of these images is that of a Latin American drug dealer while the second one is that of the inner-city Latino gangster in urban settings. Like the Mexican bandits who first appeared in Westerns, these modern-day rebels still possess a propensity toward violence, a characteristic that has prevailed in cinema over time. As has previously been mentioned, Ramírez-Berg identifies the Mexican bandit as "dirty and unkempt…vicious cruel, treacherous, shifty, and dishonest…irrational, overly emotional, and quick to resort to violence" (68).

César Chávez becomes another lens through which to reimagine the trope of the Mexican-American in film. Chávez, the antithesis of the Mexican bandit, is shown as generally displaying an even temperament and staunchly against violence in all its forms. He flexes his strategizing muscles by assembling fellow field laborers for the purpose of social advocacy. When the sheriff asks him if he can search his home, Chávez demonstrates his understanding of his constitutional right of unreasonable search and seizure by asking if the sheriff has a warrant

in order to do so. The sheriff, momentarily perplexed by his response, answers no. This is evidenced in the following scene:

SHERIFF BOGDANOVICH: You seem to be gathering quite a crowd.

CÉSAR CHÁVEZ: Is there a law against that?

SHERIFF: Chávez, you mind if we take a look around?

CÉSAR CHÁVEZ: Do you have a warrant? (*César Chávez*, 17:25-17:35)

Chávez possesses an understanding of his rights in the United States and does not result in being a modern-day bandit depiction of "feeble intelligence" to use Ramírez-Berg's wording. On the contrary, his brainpower allows him to understand the rules of being able to assemble. He not only advocates for himself but for his peers as well. Such a sketch reinvents the stereotype-replete narrative that has appeared in the film industry for decades.

A hierarchical social system is reflected in Westerns, with whites being depicted as benevolent to their villainous, Mexican bandit counterparts. Over time, the North American film industry has repeated this power imbalance for decades. Recurring images of Latina/os as bandits, gangsters, and lazy demonstrate that members of this racialized group are stripped of any access to power. If they possess undesirable characteristics, they are somehow deficient, barbaric, or inferior. On-screen re-imaginings of Latina/os by the North American film industry demonstrate an oversimplification and a fossilization of a false identity, resulting in a false conception of *Latinidad*. By lumping all Latina/os in the same category, they are portrayed in a homogeneous manner. In *César Chávez*, the farmworker becomes reimagined in such a way that deviates from traditional Hollywood sketches of Latinos. Rather than being depicted as the "typical" Latin lover, bandit, or gangster, he is shown as striving for the humane working conditions of farmworkers. Phenotypically, he fits the film industry's preconceived notions of

what a Mexican-American ought to look like. Behaviorally, his image of that as a peacemaker rather than fighter, mismatches with the imagined sense of *Latinidad* that has been designed by white mainstream filmmakers and spectators alike. In other words, an American of Mexican descent and an American of Cuban descent might be depicted as being the same kind of Latina/os without factoring into account the shades of *Latinidad* that make each ethnicity distinctive.

César Chávez, directed in 2014 by Diego Luna, in addition to chronicling only the protagonist's adulthood rather than other stages of his life, presents Chávez as saintly rather than a flawed human being who was actually not the originator of the United Farmworkers Movement. Lori Flores in *Grounds for Dreaming* (2016) explains that César Chávez did not play as pivotal a role as is often believed because, as she illustrates, fieldworkers were already unionizing in the Salinas Valley prior to his arrival. Instead of placing Chávez at the center of the Farmworkers Movement, she instead recognizes the "less exalted farmworkers, volunteers, students, and supporters who helped Chavez become a successful organizer" (22). She recognizes their centrality during this time period rather than reinforcing the false narrative that they played a passive, behind-the-scenes part during this time period.

Miriam Powell in *The Crusades of César Chávez* (2014) paints a written biography brimming with in-depth details of Chávez's life. While a written account need not be confined to a certain page limit, filmic renditions of lives often become distorted because they must be condensed to a time length of one and a half to two hours. Powell's biography includes details that were excluded in the cinematic version of Chávez's life. According to this account, Chávez was born to a migrant worker family in Yuma, Arizona, and was the second of six children. As a result of the Great Depression, his family was evicted from their farm in June 1939 and forced to

relocate to San José, California, which was a common practice during this era. Chávez began working full-time in the fields after completing the eighth grade. As migrant workers, his family struggled to find habitable homes, at times being forced to live in garages, barns, and tents. Hoping for a respite from laboring in the fields, César Chávez enlisted in the navy after he turned eighteen. After his two-year stint in the navy, he returned to Delano, where he rekindled a relationship with Helen Fabela, his soon-to-be-wife. They would later marry and have eight children. Chávez is consistently shown as having significantly improved the lives of Mexican-American migrant laborers through strikes, boycotts, and other peaceful protests.

By choosing not to include seminal moments during his young life, Diego Luna does not present César Chávez's life in its entirety. Instead, spectator-friendly elements aimed to gratify a Latina/o audience become the focus of the final product, while offering a condensed version of Mexican-American identity. As a result, "genuine" Mexican-American identity rarely appears in this and other biographical films. While Mexican-American depictions typically appear in stereotypical ways in the North American film industry, their depictions tend to be more glamorized in Latina/o-based studios, which will be explored more in-depth in this chapter.

In order to understand the manifestation of stereotypes in modern-day cinema, an understanding of the complicated roots of racial formation in the United States is essential. Ascribing certain characteristics to certain ethnicities is deeply ingrained in the film industry and difficult to undo. According to Michael Omi and Howard Winant in *Racial Formation in the United States*, racial discourse has been shaped by the conflict between white domination and the consequent resistance of people of color. Omi and Winant explain the roots of his system as follows:

> racial theory for years served mainly the interests of the powerful—white settlers, slave owners, colonial and later national elites. Entire systems of rule—labor, and political regimen among others—had to be organized, structured, regulated and explained. The concept of race, developing unevenly in the Americas from the arrival of Europeans in the Western Hemisphere down to the present, has served as a fundamental organizing principle of the social system. (3)

With this intricate web in mind, signifying "conquered" populations as the Other begins a process of dehumanization of disempowered populations. As long as disenfranchised groups exist, the elements of their individuality will remain obscured by those in power. Over time, these limited perceptions have been perpetuated through their emergence in popular culture. This hierarchy through the process of racialization appears time and time again in the *César Chávez* biopic. The "white villain" consistently "Others" Chávez and his community by reducing them to ethnic stereotypes, which will be examined more in-depth in a later part of this chapter.

The nature of Mexican-American identity in the Southwest has demonstrated to be convoluted with border-shifting events of the Mexican-American War. First, the geographic border between the United States and Mexico experienced not only geographic and political changes but also one with socially-constructed complexities as a result. As per the agreement of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848, Mexico ceded its former territories, including western Colorado, Texas, California, Nevada, Arizona, Utah, and New Mexico. Mexicans residing in the Southwest suddenly felt a sense of displacement as a new geographic border was created. These residents had to choose to either remain in the United States and suddenly become citizens or

return to their familial lands in Mexico. They did not deem Mexico to be their homeland, so the latter choice was viewed by most residents as an impossibility.

These events contributed to a sense of *deterritorialization,* as these inhabitants suddenly had to reconfigure their identities if they chose to become United States citizens. Néstor García Canclini describes the concept of *deterritorialization* as "the loss of the 'natural' relation between a culture with geographic and social territory [including] relocalizations of new and old forms of symbolic production" (288). As they learned to navigate their new border identity, newly-minted Mexican-Americans who used to be *politically* Mexican but were still *culturally* Mexican had to make sense of what it meant to be Americans.

Natalia Molina in *How Race is Made in America* explains how 1848-1930 were crucial years in ascribing meaning to Mexicans in relation to other nonwhite groups that were also seen as inferior. She emphasizes that a racial hierarchy, which she refers to as *racial scripts,* emerged through the operative lens of White Americans. In order to categorize Mexicans as the Other, they referenced other groups that they deemed as second-rate. For example, she states, "White Americans argued that Mexicans were not like them, and the best way to make this point clear was to compare Mexicans to other groups who had already been defined and established as nonwhite, nonnormative, and unfit for self-government" (34). Even though the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo of 1848 granted Mexicans citizenship, they experienced a sense of displacement in a political climate that bestowed them with citizenship rights but did not perceive them as equal citizens. Though Mexican nationals were now considered American citizens, they were not perceived as "civilized."

Mexican Americans performed "themselves" during the Delano Grape Strike of 1965. This gave a sense of immediacy to the prejudices they faced during this time period and

demonstrates one way of successfully conveying the authenticity of Mexican-American performance. Mexican-American campesinos acted, directed, and participated in the entire creative process of crafting this performance. The concept of authenticity is created because the production is for Mexican-Americans, as well as non-Mexican-Americans, and performed by actual Mexican-Americans.

Themes of Mexican-American stereotypes appeared early on in performed works of the Mexican-American Movement. Since the beginning of the farmworkers' theater in the late 1960s, actors performed the phenomenon of Mexican-Americanness. Luis Váldez, the director of *La Bamba*, who has already been mentioned in this study, founded *El Teatro Campesino*, also known as the farmworkers' theater during the Delano Grape Strike of 1965. Having enlisted farmworkers to act in his plays, Váldez aimed to raise awareness about Mexican-American stereotypes through the themes addressed in his plays. One of the early productions of Váldez' was *Los Vendidos,* written in 1967. This play shows various stereotypes held by Anglos toward Mexican-Americans. In this theatrical production, these preconceived distorted notions take the form of ready-for-sale models of Mexican-Americans in the theatrical production. A woman named Miss Jimenez—"It's pronounced JIM-enez, don't you speak English?" she says—enters the shop and is shown the various models by Sancho, the store owner. She finally selects the Mexican-American model and wants to cart him off to a political rally because her boss wants "one brown face in the crowd." This play offers a glimpse into the ways that Mexican-American identity was performed during the initial stages of the farmworkers' theater.

As has previously been mentioned in this chapter, racial hierarchies appear through a display of negative attitudes toward Mexican-Americans. In *César Chávez*, prejudices of Latina/os appear throughout the course of the film as part of a socially-constructed border. The

border transforms into a site of conflict because of how it is interpreted by those who exercise power over their exoticized counterparts. In this biographical film, those in power create racialized divisions between non-citizens and themselves. To illustrate, in one of the scenes of the biopic, César Chávez's neighbors in California report him to local authorities for congregating with other activists on a regular basis. Because a group of Mexican-Americans congregates in the neighborhood, the assumption is that they must be involved in some sort of illegal activity. When law enforcement officials arrive at Chávez's home, they ask him about the nature of the meetings. This scene illustrates the "us vs. them" mentality widespread in situations where borders collide.

In consonance with this idea, Gloria Anzaldúa reconfigured the concept of the border by identifying it as a socially-constructed space. She describes her conception of the border culture as a third country, which consists of two worlds integrating in *Borderlands: La Frontera*: "Borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish us from them. A border is a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge. A borderland is a vague and undermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary" (3). This "unnatural boundary" has been created as the result of competing discourses. The concept of the borderland becomes symbolically demonstrated through the dialogue between the sheriff, who synecdochically represents the U.S. mainstream, and Chávez, the subject lost in "a world of confusion" reminiscent of Rodolfo "Corky" Gonzales' "Yo Soy Joaquín." The conquered subject, who was formerly a citizen of another country or not, has suddenly been impelled to create a sense of meaning from the chaotic nature of being conquered and displaced. This is the "emotional residue" described by Anzaldúa in her description of vague borders. The rawness of in-betweenness appears throughout *César Chávez* when these two worlds collide.

Certain power systems, such as colonization and perceptions formed thereafter, have spread into the microcosm of the North American film industry. The racialization of Mexicans as inferior becomes apparent in many scenes of the biopic. In one scene, Jack, a friend of Bogdanovich's, states that he dislikes dealing with "dirty" foreigners. Immediately after this comment, the camera zooms in on the disgruntled face of Bogdanovich's Latina housemaid. She is cognizant of the fact that her boss perceives her as a foreigner. This scene also serves as a reminder that Bogdanovich and his friends benefit from the labor of foreigners in the domestic sphere. By showing the tension between Latina/os and non-Latina/os, *César Chávez* represents an overt treatment of cultural identity.

By keeping in mind the psychological scars faced by underrepresented populations, filmmakers can begin to steer the storyline in a way that dignifies Latina/os. In this biographical film, a focus on the dignity of Chávez provides us with a more nuanced picture of a Mexican-American as opposed to other films that have homogenized this image.

César Chávez paints a different portrait of Mexican-American identity by inverting the traditional characterizations of Mexican-Americans and their white counterparts in film. Whereas Mexican-Americans are represented as the villains in Western films and other genres, they are now represented as embodying heroic characteristics in *César Chávez*. As shown in the biofilm, Chávez does not endorse violence among his people in their efforts to unionize. In various scenes throughout the course of *César Chávez*, the iconic activist reiterates that violence is an unacceptable way to solve problems. The protagonist and members of his ethnic community endure harsh working conditions and eventually peacefully protest for better working conditions. In the cinematographic narrative, Sheriff Smith appears as the villain and the perfect antagonist to the protagonist. When Sheriff Smith visits Chávez's home, he asks if all the people

are assembled in order to "sell piñatas or something." His discriminatory viewpoint introduces the theme of the prejudiced white man as the enemy throughout the biofilm. Not only is the villainous white man portrayed as racist, but he also resorts to inhumane measures in order to exploit Chávez and his people. For example, the police officers spray picketers with pesticide, and later, while being interrogated by Robert Kennedy, they contend that they are not aware of such an occurrence.

The white villain in *César Chávez* provides a contrary perspective to the cinematic trope of the white savior in film. Matthew W. Hughey explains that the trope of the white savior in film is composed of a white saint-like figure who saves a nonwhite character from unfortunate circumstances (1). Vera adds to this concept by stating that the white protagonist in film functions as "the redeemer of the weak, the great leader who saves blacks from slavery or oppression, rescues people of color from poverty and disease, or leads Indians in battle for their dignity and survival" (3). Rather than portraying underrepresented groups as agents of change, they are shown as powerless people needing to be rescued. Various characters in the film represent a barbaric white figure. During a peaceful protest, an Anglo hits a picketer with his vehicle. This scene shows an utter disregard for human life. In another scene, Bogdanovich says, "I hate dealing with these dirty foreigners, but we can't keep putting on fake labels forever." Far from sketching the white man as beneficent, this scene demonstrates the depth of his racism. His belief shows the level of dehumanization deeply embedded in the psyche of this character. In sum, non-stereotypical portrayals of Latinos act as useful foils against their previous illustrations in the North American film industry.

Whereas the white savior has appeared as a recurring figure in mainstream cinema, the redeemer in this film is Mexican-American. Baffled by the invisibility of Chávez in a biopic,

director Diego Luna chose to idealize his life. Consequently, Luna distorted history to such an extent that it misrepresents a Mexican-American life in order to exalt the status of an underrepresented figure in cinema. Rather than showing another negative reincarnation of a stereotype, Luna places the performance of the Mexican-American on the other end of the spectrum by making Chávez appear heroic (Flores 22).

To portray a Mexican-American icon in an overly positive light does not accurately reflect his life either. Historical accuracy cannot occur because of the filmmakers' desire to entertain an audience and yield hefty box office profits. Luna was cognizant of the fact that his audience was primarily Latina/o and consequently appealed to their sentimentality. If a Mexican-American was finally shown as saintly, perhaps it would give Latina/os hope for new cinematic representations of one of their own.

César Chávez is portrayed as staunchly committed to nonviolence throughout the biopic. During a convention, he rages: "Those of you running around destroying things, giving into your hatred, giving into your chickenshit macho ideals are seriously sabotaging the efforts of La Causa, and I will not stand for it" (*César Chávez*, 00:59:11-00:59:22).

In this scene, Chávez recognizes that some members of La Causa are not practicing pacifism, which is of utmost importance to him as the leader of the cause. Influenced by the ideals of Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr., he believes that the use of violence is an unacceptable way to obtain better pay and treatment for the farmworkers. As a means of negotiation, he vehemently believed in using only non-violent tactics. The representation of Latino as a pacifist disrupts the image of the Latino gang member in film so prevalent in the Hollywood movie industry. This scene in the biopic serves as a lens into a more humanized portrayal of a Latino icon. In another scene, Chávez speaks with his son, Fernando, about coping

with bullying at his school. When the father asks his son who started the fight, the son answers that he did not have a choice in the matter. In the movie quote that perhaps most aptly describes Chávez's philosophy of peace, he reminds his son that he *always* has a choice. Selecting peaceful protests over violence is a creed by which Chávez lived his life. The issue of prejudices against Mexican-Americans experienced between father and son reveals that racism has persisted from one generation to another. Chávez helps his son to navigate a racial hierarchy that ascribes negative characteristics to their ethnicity.

Film scholar Andrew Sarris, as has previously been mentioned, according to his a*uteur theory,* explains that the director has the most influence in film authorship. Diego Luna, a Mexicano rather than a Mexican-American, participated in the process of crafting a Mexican-American-centered biographical film. In the first chapter of this study, Chon Noriega's definition of a Mexican-American film has been mentioned. To reiterate, she emphasizes that a Mexican-American film *about* Mexican-Americans is produced *by* Mexican-Americans. However, Luna, with the vantage point of a Mexican, offers his own conceptualization of what it means to be Mexican-American, which provides additional points of study in terms of understanding how Mexican-American identity is pieced together on the screen. Not only does his ethnicity impact the contours of identity, but so does his independent film studio, which is not Hollywood-based.

Diego Luna has had a prolific career in the Mexican film industry. Luna, born in 1979 in Toluca, Mexico, is a notable on-screen character, director, and co-proprietor of the Mexican-based film company Canana Films. His acting career started when he was 16, and he played the role of Huicho Dominguez's son in *El Premio Mayor*. In 2002, he achieved national recognition in the Golden-Globe-winning film *Y tu mamá también,* which amassed $33.6 million at the box

office. Notwithstanding his roles in telenovelas and Mexican-delivered silver screen, he has appeared in U.S.-based movies, such as the 2008 biopic *Milk*.

Diego Luna coordinated the biographical film, *César Chávez*, in 2014. He commenced a four-year journey to make a biopic of a notable Latino who had not yet been artistically crafted by the North American film industry. In a meeting with Judi Jordan, Luna clarified that he was totally stunned by the way that a film about Chávez had never been made. He clarified that he was baffled that cinema had made him invisible, especially in the United States, which has historically rewarded accomplished individuals (30).

Referring to previous explanations of Luna's attempts to appeal to a Latina/o audience, Diego's representation of César Chávez remaps the sketch of the Mexican-American. Whereas the person of color is typically portrayed in film as falling short in some way and needing to be rescued by the white messiah-like character, in this film, the person of color, César Chávez, possesses all the necessary characteristics required in order to save himself. He can advocate for himself in spite of his eighth-grade education, and he can play an integral role in helping the farm workers unionize. The trope of the white savior, then, becomes obscured in this biopic, which is something that has become commonplace in the mainstream film industry. In explaining the concept of white saviorism, Matthew W. Hughey notes:

> This trope [of white saviorism] is so widespread that varied intercultural and interracial relations are often guided by a logic that racializes and separates people into those who are redeemers (whites) and those who are redeemed or in need of redemptions (nonwhites). Such imposing patronage enables an interpretation of nonwhite characters and culture as essentially broken, marginalized, and pathological, white whites can

> emerge as messianic characters that easily fix the nonwhite pariah with their superior moral and mental abilities (2).

In consonance with this idea, Charles Ramírez-Berg refers to the white savior as "the sun around which the film narrative revolves" (67). Such a narrative is so ingrained in the storyline that nonwhite characters become relegated to a status of inferiority. Because nonwhite characters are perceived as deficient in some way, the white messiah functions as someone who fills in the missing gaps of this flawed person.

Luna created a biographical film of an iconic Latino who had not been represented in any major motion picture. According to an interview he gave, his vision was to tell the story of a simple man who used nonviolence as a means to wage war on the produce industry. In an interview with Judi Jordan, Luna explains that

> the main idea was to try not to idealize the character but tell the story of a simple man that happened to do something amazing...It's about living with responsibility and helping this weak community living in this very unbalanced situation...I wanted to focus on the boycott...I also wanted to tell the story of nonviolence (*Jordan*, par. 31).

In this interview, Luna reveals that he did not aim to idealize Chávez, but sketched him in the sense that he aggrandized Chávez's accomplishments and his place in history. However, Luna succeeds in some instances in showing a flawed human being, such as showing displays of jealousy on Chávez's part as a husband. In the scene where Chávez picks up his wife from jail, she explains to him about the positive experience that she had with one of her "amazing" cellmates. Chávez's facial demeanor changes, quickly becoming irritated, and he asks prying questions about the factors that made this guy so "amazing," implying that his wife was romantically interested in the guy. Helen tells her husband not to be jealous, and he angrily

looks away and responds that he is not jealous. Such a scene captures the ways that Chávez was not as saintly as he has often been portrayed.

Directing a two-hour film about a life spanning 66 years is a challenge in and of itself. This process of crafting a two-hour biopic involves part art form and part historical re-imagining by the filmmakers involved in this balancing process. As a result of the filmic interpretation of a life, the Latina/o cultural reality becomes an alternate universe in which Latina/os are homogenized. This abstract, essentialized, and stereotype-replete notion of Latina/o identity, then, falsely represents Latina/os because of the need to follow an established film industry formula with mainstream appeal. Filmmakers, with the embedded images of Latina/os in their psyches, examine the lives of their subjects and distort the final product with the end goal of entertaining an audience. Within the constraints of two hours, the actors have to find a way to perform Mexican-Americanness in such a way that it is believable to its spectators.

Another cinematic element that Luna believed needed to be inserted in the biopic is the location site; it was filmed in Sonora, Mexico, rather than in Delano, California. Even though most of the events in *César Chávez* transpired in California, the film was actually filmed in Sonora, Mexico, for an important visual element. Luna wanted to include the 1960s vineyards style no longer apparent in today's fields in California. This type of retro-style landscape provided a level of historical authenticity by showing the fields as they would have appeared for the field workers during this decade. After scouting the fields in Delano, Luna concluded that the technology employed in the fields has changed dramatically since the sixties. Lastly, real-life fruit pickers worked as extras in the film. In reference to this, Luna told the Boston-Globe, "I wanted those faces to look real. No makeup can substitute for faces that have actually been under the sun." By choosing to include actual fruit pickers, Luna adds a transnational level of

authenticity to his portrayal of *Latinidad*. Rather than hosting a casting call and hiring actors, he selected field laborers who have been exposed to the conditions of harsh labor.

In contrast to the other biopics of this study, *César Chávez* was not produced in the United States. It was produced by Canana, a Mexican-based production company. As a result, various ideologies shaped the production of this biopic because of a different cultural landscape than that of its northern counterparts. This cultural landscape further proves that Mexican-American identity is endowed with certain traits on the part of the filmmaker or other artists engaging in the cinematic process. For example, a director born and raised in Mexico will have a different understanding of identity politics than a director born and raised in the United States. The portrayal of Mexican-American identity, then, is heavily influenced by the type of spectatorship driving the industry. To illustrate, the film, *César Chávez* is created to have transnational appeal not only to Mexicans but other Spanish-speaking Latina/os.

As a Mexican-based production company, Canana offers a different perspective on *Latinidad*. Canana Films, a production studio based in Mexico City, was formed by Gael Garcia Bernal, Diego Luna, and Pablo Cruz. Pantelion, an American distribution company composed of Lionsgate and Televisa, a Mexican company, describes itself as "the first Latino Hollywood studio" on its official website. It is important to note that Pantelion targets the Hispanic population in the United States, which now numbers approximately 58.6 million[6]. One process of attracting this demographic entails the incorporation of the Spanish language in film. Marketer Peter Starnard notes the intimate link between the Spanish language and Latina/os residing in the United States, stating that "An advertiser will go further in appealing to the Hispanic's buying impulses if it can touch the consumer's emotions in its own language" (qtd. in Krampf 44). By

[6] This figure is from the Pew Research Center.

including Latina/os as mass consumers, distribution companies and marketers validate the demographic rather than Othering it. In contrast to the vision of the filmmakers in the 1980s, contemporary biographical films take a Hispanic spectatorship into account. When Latina/o spectators see themselves reflected on the silver screen, they appreciate this relatability factor and are more likely to support and subsequently spend money on films that portray the authenticity of their culture.

In an interview with NPR's Manuel Betancourt, Edward Allen, Lionsgate's chief operating officer explained the following:

> Our mission statement is to provide quality movies for the Latino audience in the United States, movies and stories that speak to them. Most of what we've been doing is in Spanish, but we are very aware and appreciate the fact that it's not a homogenous group and we just need to be very smart about what projects we pick and how we market those projects. (*Betancourt*, par. 8)

The producers of Canana are cognizant that an Anglocentric, U.S.-based audience is not the litmus test of their success. Because the end goal is to achieve success with Latina/o audiences, the narrative deviates from one created by a Hollywood production company that consistently dabbles in stereotypes for non-Latin audiences. As a result, social issues and other contemporary trends of relevance to a Latino/a audience manifest themselves in these biographical films.

César Chávez, eventually distributed in the United States, operates as a symbolic border crossing. More specifically, the film has found a way to flow transnationally from one film industry to the other while still maintaining a distinct flavor that distinguishes Canana-produced films from "Hollywoodized" production companies. Adhering to its Mexican identity, Canana seeks to maintain a level of authenticity in its filmic discourse. Pablo Cruz, one of the founders

of Canana films, explained to the *Hollywood Reporter* in 2007 that, "We don't have studio dreams, we just want to focus on what's important. Cinema is the only way to document what's truly happening in our times because the news programs are fake, the soap operas make no sense, and comedy shows aren't real" (Hecht 2007). A certain kind of invented Chicana/o community becomes depicted in the *César Chávez* biopic. Benedict Anderson uses the term *imagined communities* to describe the concept of an imagined nationhood**.** He explains that "members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (49). This quote can be applied when taking into account that Luna, a man of Mexican origin, attempted to depict the life of a Chicano in the best way he was able to imagine it. The representation of Latina/os in biographical film offers a glimpse into the ways their identities are perceived by popular culture. According to him, "communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined" (6). From those involved in the initial stages of crafting the film to the actors that gave life to the written screenplay, these individuals create an invented notion of what it means to be a community.

Because it is based in Mexico City and is an independent production company, Canana has written the filmic narrative in a way that differs from a more "Hollywoodized" studio. As a result of the cultural fabric and demographics of the United States and Mexico, the creation of the biopic differs from one country to another. Furthermore, the vantage point of Diego Luna, a Mexican born director, arguably differs from that of a Mexican-American or non-Latino director. As a result, the *César Chávez* biopic reflects the ideologies of a filmmaker born and raised in a country with differing beliefs about identity politics. Rather than the entrenched

belief of the "Latino as deficient" that appears in Hollywood, the conviction of the heroic Latino manifests itself in *César Chávez*.

A contentious debate surrounds the notion of a national cinema, with some audiences perceiving national cinema as static, while others recognize the changing nature of national identity. This notion may be defined as a bound geographic sphere with a cohesive identity; however, others perceive that national cinema exists in transnational terms and must take the diversity of its constituents into account. In describing national cinema from the context of British cinema, film critic John Hill writes:

> It is quite possible to conceive of a national cinema, in the sense of one which works with or addresses nationally specific materials, which is none the less critical of inherited notions of national identity, which *does not assume the existence of a unique or unchanging 'national culture,'* and which is quite capable of dealing with social divisions and differences (17).

Hill echoes the sentiments of Benedict Anderson's imagined communities in his understanding of national cinema. National identity is not comprised of a fixed identity but ought to take into account its ever-changing, fluid nature impacted by its diverse populations. In the same vein, Luna's career trajectory exposed him to the concept of factoring diversity into the formula of illustrating the notion of identity. As has been observed on the screen, the type of *Latinidad* that appears is imagined Latinidad.

César Chávez's director Diego Luna significantly influenced the final product of the biopic because of his own life. In terms of the crafting of a Latina/o image, *César Chávez* chronicles the adulthood of the activist. Impediments exist in crafting Latina/o lives in a way that takes all of the Latina/o contours of identity account. Because the aim of filmmakers is to

yield hefty box office returns, Latina/os are often reimagined in a way that reflects mainstream appeal. Rather than showing the authenticity of the Latina/o lives, a condensed representation becomes apparent. Latina/o studies scholar Angharad Valdivia describes the intricate web of negotiating identity with all the participants in the filmmaking process as follows:

> Those involved in the production of media content must contend with their industry's economic profit imperatives as well as with audiences' implicit demands for the presence of identifiable people who go beyond stereotypes and of narratives that work toward social justice rather than toward reifying oppression" (*Valdivia*, page number not specified in source)

The audience, then, distorts the final depictions of Mexican-Americanness, so that this phenomenon is never performed in an authentic way. Instead, what appears before the spectator is Mexican-Americanness with the intent to entertain.

Producers and directors decide how Mexican-American identity is performed in their films not because of how Mexican-American identity *is* but because of how it has been performed previously or how it has informed the filmmakers'and film viewers' public memory. Gender scholar Judith Butler has been mentioned in this study as having theorized the notion of performativity, in which gender is essentially performed by a subject (25). Her theory has cross-discipline value, offering a vantage point through which to view the concept of performance as applied to Mexican-American studies, for example.

Preconceived notions of what Latinness means become apparent in casting characters to play Latina/o protagonists. Because of his prominence in Hollywood films, some filmmakers suggested Antonio Banderas as the protagonist, which would have perpetuated the stereotype of the Latin lover because his physique and aura are similar to Rudolph Valentino's, the original

Latin lover described earlier in this study. Luna envisioned an actor that could depict an authentic Mexican-American experience. Rather than casting a character who abides by the ideal cinema physique, Luna adopted a different artistic vision for his biographical film, wanting the protagonist to match the actual stocky body type of Chávez. The Hollywood film industry has established certain physical attributes as being the most desirable for its actors. The Photoplay Research Society published a book entitled *Opportunities in the Motion Picture Industry—and How to Qualify for Positions in Its Many Branches* in which the ideal man in the motion picture industry is described:

> *Features.* –Regular, but not necessarily classic. The virile type of he-man is more popular than the very handsome hero. Strong features are better than small features.
>
> *Complexion.* –Men usually photograph dark, so that the medium blonde makes the best type. But the attractive brunette who has a reputation for being 'romantic' certainly pleases the women.
>
> *Stature.* – Not too short. A man has to be over five feet four. Occasionally a comedian or a juvenile will get away with less, but the hero must tower above his lady love. Rich Barthelmess is not tall; neither is Charles Ray. The ideal man of the movies is a little over that vague standard known as 'average height.'
>
> *Weight.*— A man can be heavy if he wants to be funny, but if he expects to be taken seriously, he must be slender. The long lines are better than the broad, although fans are apt to classify the large-framed, big-boned man as 'virile.' (Addison 60)

Per this definition, Antonio Banderas would have made the perfect Hollywood-formula Latino protagonist for the César Chávez biographical film. After all, he represents the stereotyped image of the tall, dark, and handsome man. Banderas, a Spanish actor, has played the part of the

quintessential Hispanic in various films and has thus become falsely emblematic of all Latinos. Hailing from Málaga, Spain, he has become denationalized, with his Spanish heritage erased in film by transforming his identity into other types of *Latinidad*. Filmmakers and spectators alike have come to perceive that Banderas represents a Pan-Hispanic ideal -- Mexicans, Cubans, and other Hispanics. This represents the filmmakers' process of crafting *Latinidad* as an imaginary notion. Again, this illustrates the ways in which Hispanics in film appear in Hollywood without taking into account the heterogeneity of their identity. In the end, the images that reappear are the typical sketches of, for example, the Latin lover, the gangster, and the male buffoon. In lieu of showing the specificities of ethnicity, films show the recurring stereotypes prevalent in the film industry and to audiences who have become accustomed and inured to this Spanish-Hispanic ideal.

Maintaining the authenticity of a biopic subject, rather than following a Hollywood code of mainstream success, is one technique that adds to the panorama of Mexican-Americanness. Rather than casting a Spanish actor to play the role of a Mexican-American, director Diego Luna chose a lesser-known Mexican-American actor, Michael Peña, to play a Mexican-American person, César Chávez. This made the image of Chávez more authentic than if Banderas would have played the role. A Chicago native and the son of Mexican immigrants, Michael Peña grew up speaking Spanish and English. He adopted a different angle of Latinness in his preparation for César Chávez, altering his speech patterns in order to more realistically convey the iconic activist and gaining weight in order to sketch Chávez's stocky physique as it really was. In the process of "becoming" César Chávez, Michael Peña studied the Mexican-American dialect of the 1960s and became acquainted with Chávez's family in order to master Chávez's oratory

skills. Furthermore, he gained 30 pounds in order to make the protagonist as authentic as possible. He explains that

> I did gain the weight, and thank God that I did because you know, this was a man who wasn't prone to violence, and if I looked like a Hollywood actor guy that was like in really good shape, then it doesn't look real and it's not real. And then I actually shaved like a little gap in between my teeth. The way he said "S"s, a lot of the air passed through it. It really informed the way that he spoke. (*NPR interview*, pars. 5-6)

By attempting to impersonate Chávez, Michael Peña demonstrates a portrayal that is more authentic to Chávez's unique Mexican-American life as a farm worker and activist. Rather than abiding by a film industry code that expects actors to possess certain physical attributes, such as being extremely thin, Peña alters his physique in order to accurately represent César Chávez in a way befitting to his actual stature.

By altering his body shape and speech patterns, Peña demonstrates the importance of being true to the actual character being portrayed in the biopic. William H. Epstein defines the concept of *verisimilitudinous casting*, in which the "actor typically either already looks like the subject to be portrayed…or can be consumed and made up to do so" (27). Taking into account how the actor resembles a real-life character is a starting point for combating the process of Latina/o homogenization that has traditionally occurred in the North American film industry. In mainstream Hollywood films, Mexican-Americans have been portrayed as speaking a certain way. By capturing Chávez's mannerisms and prose, he endows a real-life Mexican-American's representation with dignity. In addition to performing for spectators for whom the screening of the film might be their first-ever exposure to his life story, he is also performing for people who

actually interacted with Chávez during his lifetime, such as his wife Helen and his sister-in-law Dolores Huerta.

Even though Peña is Mexican-American, he elucidates the idiosyncrasies of a different kind of Mexican-American in another part of the United States and during a particular historical moment. *Latinidad*, then, exists on a spectrum with varying degrees of dialects and geographic differences from one immigrant to another. As evidenced by Peña's dedication to a real-life portrayal of a Mexican-American, he succeeds in sketching the Chicanidad within *Latinidad* in this biographical film.

Another way he demonstrated the idiosyncrasies of a Mexican-American during a certain time period was to master Chávez's personality and speech patterns. After conducting thorough research, Michael Peña discovered that Chávez was a meek man. Even though he led an entire movement, his oratory skills were subpar. For three months, Peña practices portraying Chávez in a way that was authentic to the activist. In addition to learning his speech patterns, Peña had to alter his energy for the role.

Peña understands the push and pull factors of film industries. Even though his natural inclination was to glamorize Chávez's character in a way that aligned with the Hollywood ideal, he recognizes the importance of sketching Chávez as authentically as possible. The Mexican film industry, then, provides a platform for telling life stories in a way that does not align with the traditional Hollywood code of, for example, casting Banderas for every Hispanic role.

Instead of romanticizing the characters in *César Chávez*, Diego Luna presents their multidimensionality by not only highlighting their strengths but by portraying them as flawed beings. As a result, the characters elicit positive and negative reactions from the audience. A

trailblazing activist for farm workers, Chávez embodies heroic qualities throughout the film and imprints himself in the public memory of *Latinidad*.

After Chávez picks up his wife from prison, she relates the story of a male inmate she befriended. Filled with jealousy, Chávez displays a sense of insecurity and asks his wife if she plans on seeing this man again. This scene depicts the activist in a "non-saintly" way. Rather than maintaining his composure at all times, which would be the expectation the audience has of the activist, he reveals the occasional temper flare of a flawed human being. Diego Luna does not idealize the protagonist's role from this perspective – instead, he presents the multidimensional aspects of his character, eliciting positive and negative reactions from the spectators of the biopic. While Chávez is shown as a heroic man in numerous instances of the film, at other times he is shown to be imperfect. The complexity of his character reveals a Luna's attempt at sketching Chávez as flawed, but he still does not prove successful in sketching him as authentically Mexican-American because of the extent to which he glamorizes him.

In recent years, multifaceted portrayals of womanhood have been represented in works of Latino-centric films, or films in which Latina/os take center stage. While some women have been depicted in the traditional aspect of being submissive, others have become agents of change regardless of expectations imposed on them by their culture, family, and other sources of pressure in their lives. In *César Chávez*, the characters of Helen Chávez and Dolores Huerta reconfigure traditional Mexican-American womanhood by demonstrating a non-adherence to patriarchy in their lives. Helen, Chávez's wife, and Dolores Huerta, his sister-in-law and co-founder of the United Farm Worker, appear as having occupied a prominent place in the history of the farmworkers' quest for access to humane working conditions.

Women played a vital role during the movement, which was another part of director Diego Luna's artistic vision in creating the *César Chávez* biopic. Luna wanted to give visibility to women's roles that had not been legitimized in the history of the movement. By including César Chávez's wife in the type of historical narrative that typically focuses on the role of men during this time period, Luna placed her at the forefront of the movement as a character who played an integral part of *La Causa* rather than depicting her as a passive woman during this moment of upheaval. Traditionally, Mexican-American women have been expected to abide by patriarchal rules that disempower them.

The *César Chávez* biopic disrupts stereotypical gender roles rather than perpetuating them through its portrayal of an empowered sense of womanhood. Even though her husband attempts to dissuade her from protesting, she decides of her own accord that she will go on strike. In one scene of the biopic, Chávez and his family members discuss the prohibition of the utterance of the word *huelga*, the Spanish word for strike, by local law enforcement officials. Knowing full well that this will result in her imprisonment, Helen announces that she will be the first to break this rule. Chávez instructs his wife to do no such thing. This scene shows a husband trying to exert dominance over his wife, and Helen does not acquiesce to his demands. Instead of being the traditional submissive wife, she proclaims what she will and will not do, proving her autonomy in the process.

Traditional gender roles stem from a hierarchy established by patriarchal society with roots in Roman Catholicism. While *machismo,* the belief that men can dictate the behavior of women, sculpts the behavior of Latino men, marianismo influences the comportment of many Latina women. Traditionally, Latino men are culturally valued more than women, placing them at the top rung of the societal hierarchy. Machismo extends beyond the confines of valorization

of Latino men. While the conception is that they are dominant, they are also expected to fulfill the role of breadwinner in the household.

For centuries, marianismo has established cultural expectations of Latinas. Political scientist Evelyn P. Stevens coined and defines marianismo as "the cult of female spiritual superiority which teaches that women are semi-divine, morally superior to and spiritually stronger than men" (91). Specifically, women are expected to practice abstinence until marriage and to be submissive toward their husbands. Empowered female characters are shown in *César Chávez* as having forged their own identity regardless of expectations imposed on them by their culture. Helen Chávez, as portrayed by America Ferrera, asserts herself to such an extent that she often goes against the wishes of her husband. She proclaims to her husband that she will risk imprisonment by defying the police's prohibition of shouting "huelga" in the fields. In this scene, Chávez becomes angry that his wife is willing to sacrifice her freedom for the sake of other migrant workers. *César Chávez,* then, does not universalize the experience of Latinas. Instead, it offers an alternative vantage point of womanhood. Rather than being depicted through the patriarchal view of women as passive and submissive, Helen Chávez dares to defy the societal expectations of her behavior. She breaks with this expected code of conduct by asserting herself and disagreeing with the expectation that her own husband has of her comportment.

Another way Luna illuminates the importance of women during the farmworker movement is through the role of Dolores Huerta, co-founder of the United Farm Workers. As a result of recent social and historical issues, a growing tendency exists to make prominent female figures visible in history and film. This visibility of Mexican-Americans contributes to the shifting trend of making previously omitted subjects visible due to an acknowledgement of Latina/os as an essential part of the cultural fabric of the United States. A heightened interest in

Dolores Huerta's life has been observed in recent years. In 2017, PBS released the award-winning eponymous documentary *Dolores*, directed by Peter Bratt. This documentary chronicles Huerta's life from her childhood to her modern day role in activism. Historically, when the plight of those involved in the United Farm Workers Union has been examined, César Chávez has received the most accolades for his role in the initiation of the organization. Unbeknownst to many, Dolores Huerta played just as integral a role as co-founder of the United Farm Workers. Depicting unsung heroes shows a different kind of trend in biopics – giving visibility to the previously invisible Mexican-American women.

Spectatorship, as shaped by a Latina/o audience, becomes apparent in *César Chávez* as evidenced by the film's aim to entertain this specific audience. Keeping its Latino-centric base in mind, this biopic does not accurately illustrate the multi-ethnic cooperation between the Filipinos and the Mexican-Americans. Absent from biopic's recreation of the history of the Chicano Movement is the prominent role that Filipinos played in obtaining rights for farm workers during this time. Larry Itliong, the leader of the Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee, was born in the Philippines in 1913, 26 years before César Chávez (Bacon 19). Itliong's contribution is often overlooked because of his less peaceful tactics and adherence to communist principles. The success achieved by the farmworkers is usually attributed to César Chávez and his Mexican-American comrades. The historical invisibility of Filipinos becomes apparent in the biopic. From a production studio perspective, this is understandable because the targeted biopic audience is Latina/o, not Filipina/o. Itliong rarely appears in the film and is depicted as having played a minor role in advocating for farm workers' rights. His underplayed role helps to magnify Chávez's depiction as a larger-than-life activist.

This chapter has examined the contours of Mexican-American identity as illustrated in film in contrast to the way a protagonist is depicted, the ways that Mexican-Americans have been relegated to the bottom of a political hierarchy, and finally, how director Luna and Canana, a Mexican-based film studio, sketch César Chávez in such a way that renders him more authentic than the Latina/o depictions of his northern counterparts.

Filmmakers, then, often forfeit authentic representations of *Latinidad* for the pursuit of financial gain. In other words, a normative audience becomes the privileged audience, dictating the process whereby Latina/os become represented in a watered-down way. Such constraints make it impossible for filmmakers to represent Latinos authentically in film. Because Canana was produced in Mexico, the concept of a white normative audience was not considered the mainstream during its production. On the other end of the spectrum, rather than showing a stereotype-replete film, *César Chávez* demonstrates a glamorized version of a Mexican-American. The Mexican-Americanness that appears in this film has been constructed in such a way that it appeals to the Latina/o-based spectators targeted by Canana. The concept of Mexican-Americanness that appears shows the unique life of César Chávez rather than sketching a Latino as it has traditionally been sketched by Hollywood.

On the one hand, Hollywood does not depict the authenticity of Mexican-American identity because it must fight against the stereotype-filled images that have persisted of the Mexican-American on the silver screen for decades. On the other hand, Canana, a Mexican-based studio, also fails to show the authenticity of Chávez by glamorizing him. In sum, the spectatorship of each studio drives the final image of Mexican-American identity that appears on the screen. Because filmmakers strive to entertain, the final product of the Mexican-American becomes a multilayered web composed of artificiality and authenticity. The sketch that appears

in the biopic is based on an actual person, not a depicted pan-ethnic identity. What appears on the screen is a cinematic concoction of Mexican-American performance.

CHAPTER IV

MEXICAN-AMERICANNESS IN SCHOOL CULTURE PRE- AND POST-9/11

The biographical films mentioned in this study thus far -- *La Bamba, Selena,* and *César Chávez* – have examined Mexican-American identity in different ways. The first two films, released in the 1980s and 1990s, reflect the importance of ancestral identity while *César Chávez,* released in 2011, shows present-day interest in the life of a Mexican-American who had previously been absent in biographical films. Furthermore, Mexican-American identity as seen or performed in *César Chávez* has been shaped by its Latino-centric spectatorship. In this chapter, the biographical films *McFarland, USA,* and *Spare Parts* provide another such platform through which to observe the components of Mexican-American identity. *McFarland* touches upon the subject of inhumane treatment toward crop laborers while showing scenes replete with enduring Latino tropes as well as paradigm-shifting ones, while *Spare Parts* highlights the adversity encountered by undocumented Mexican-Americans residing in the United States.

Underdog sports biopics that have been prolific for decades in the North American film industry have, from a cinematic standpoint, paved the way for modern-day sports biographies of Latina/os. Biographical films like *Hoosiers* (1986), *Remember the Titans* (2000), and *The Blind Side* (2009) have memorialized the actual lives, but perhaps not a truly depicted identity as argued in this study, of prolific athletes. Upon an examination of the ways they have constructed minority identity, such films serve as sites of ideological conflict between hegemonic groups and subordinate society members. The Latina/o biopics in this chapter continue the discussion of conflict experienced by underrepresented members of society, namely crop laborer life in *McFarland, USA* and undocumented migration in *Spare Parts.*

From the inception of the film industry in the United States, biopics have been produced with the interests of a white spectatorship in mind. Within the past two decades, as filmmakers recognize the importance of appealing to a Hispanic demographic that approaches approximately 58 million, a more diverse, Latino-friendly spectatorship is being taken into account. This chapter recognizes that over time, filmmakers are deviating more and more from this "white majority" trend and focusing on a more Latino-centric spectatorship by taking into account contemporary Mexican-American issues, such as working conditions for field laborers, educational inequity, and undocumented migration.

The subject of individuals who have achieved success through a meritocracy has appealed to the individualistic culture of the United States. In *Contesting Identities,* Aaron Baker states that "When it comes to sports films, the overriding example of hegemonic representation is their repeated endorsement of the viability and usefulness of self-reliance—and therefore the irrelevance of a social identity based on one's membership in a group" (2). This chapter suggests that *McFarland, USA* disrupts this filmic pattern by constructing Latina/o identity in such a way that promotes the importance of collectivism instead of self-reliance. The ideology of collectivism, which is a traditional expectation in Mexican-American culture, prevails over individual achievement in *McFarland, USA*. Even though Thomas Valles wins the state championship and his teammates are among the top-place finishers, the importance of their achievement as a group becomes the crux of the biographical film. In the *César Chávez* chapter of this study, I have argued that Chávez must disrupt with a collectivist ideology in order to achieve progress as an activist. On the other hand, *McFarland* embraces the Latina/o concept of collectivism, extending this ideology to Latina/os and non-Latina/os alike.

McFarland, USA (2015) has now made it on the list of noteworthy sports films produced by the North American film industry, grossing over 45 million dollars at the box office. Based on the McFarland High School cross country team of 1987, the biographical film chronicles the story of Latinos in an economically disadvantaged community and their quest to win the first California state cross-country championship with the help of Coach Jim White. This biopic remaps Latina/o identity by showing Latina/os as capable of achieving athletic stardom in the United States.

In order to point out the justices faced in the fields by migrant workers, *McFarland, USA* presents the harsh reality of their daily lives. The cross-country runners featured in the film helped support their families by picking crops before and after school. In order to understand their plight, Coach White volunteers to pick crops with his runners and their families. As he picks crops with his runners and their families, he asks how much the laborers make:

COACH WHITE: You get paid by the hour?

RUNNER WHOEVER: Not by the hour. By the field.

COACH WHITE: By the field?

RUNNER WHOEVER: The faster we get this one done, the more our father makes.

COACH WHITE: Hey, Damacio! How old were you guys when you started working for your dad?

DAMACIO: 10? 11? (*McFarland, USA*, 1:07:18-1:07:32)

Coach White, played by Kevin Costner, is relatable to a white mainstream spectatorship. By placing himself in the working conditions of the crop pickers, spectators can easily sympathize with the events unraveling on the screen. If he can work in the fields and gain firsthand experience about the working conditions, he might be able to transmit the difficulties of this

work to spectators who have never toiled in such conditions. Coach White endures the physical challenge that field laborers typically experience. After picking crops for a short period of time, he begins to experience back problems. Damacio advises him to lie down so that he can have his back massaged. This scene serves to humanize field laborers because the protagonist, as a representative of mainstream constituents, experiences firsthand the harsh conditions of toiling in scorching heat. As a result of empathizing with his underprivileged Mexican-American athletes, Coach Jim White becomes a relatable character for Latina/o and Non-Latina/o spectators alike.

Furthermore, the biographical film demonstrates the way that the personal lifestyles of the runners worked in their favor in an athletic setting. To begin with, being underprivileged helped the runners achieve success as cross-country runners. Thomas Valles did not own a car, so he built up his endurance by running from one end of McFarland to the other. A life of awakening before sunrise to pick crops with their parents instilled a sense of discipline that helped the runners on the race course. Coach White helped his runners capitalize on the discipline already evident in their lives away from school. A new identity of Latinos as athletic powerhouses supplants the identities created and perpetuated by the Hollywood film industry. As has been seen previously in this study, some of these traditional sketches include that of the Mexican as gangster, lowrider, and Latin lover. The demonstration of a combined work ethic and swiftness in the runners recognizes a different type of image than what spectators have been programmed to expect. In the film, the students begin their life trajectory as field laborers, become cross-country state champions, and finally, for the most part, enter the professional working world of education and journalism. At the end of the movie, while the real-life characters are shown in McFarland, it is revealed through end-of-film captions that Jose Cardenas is a writer for *The Los Angeles Times* and that Johnny Samaniego teaches at a middle

school in McFarland. The depiction of Latinos as successful inverts the prevailing image of "the lazy Mexican". Time and time again, not only has the film industry contributed to this notion, but also the image of the Mexican as indolent has infiltrated the public consciousness through the stereotypically iconic statue of a sleeping Mexican wearing a sombrero. A biographical film of redemption, *McFarland, USA* shows Latinos freeing themselves from former oppressive identities. The success of the McFarland runners reinvents the narrative that has historically disempowered them.

Throughout the biopic, there are scenes in which members of the white mainstream interact with Latina/os, showing one as a contrast to the other. The cinematic ways that these scenes are illustrated show the formulation of *Latinidad* through the vantage point of the filmmakers in the U.S. mainstream. For example, the concept of tropicalization appears in *McFarland, USA,* perpetuating a skewed view of the U.S. mainstream culture toward Latina/os groups. Tropicalization, a phenomenon whereby Latina/os are depicted as exotic through cultural signifiers indicative of the Caribbean, such as through imagery of palm trees and jungles, continues to manifest itself in contemporary biopics (Aparicio & Chávez-Silverman, 1997). Lupe in *McFarland, USA* represents this generalized approach to the image of the Mexican-American in biopics. Her appearance and her personality play into this depiction of tropicalization. In the first scene where Lupe makes an appearance, after Cheryl's car breaks down, Lupe emerges from a nail salon in a brightly-colored neon blue outfit that reveals a curvaceous body, accessorized with dangling earrings. Her eye-catching appearance and personality, as opposed to the neutral colors worn by Cheryl and the calm demeanor she exhibits, makes these characters two perfect foils. Serving as a foil to her white counterpart, she has a voluptuous physique and wears flashy apparel that catches the eye of the spectator. Lupe, in

contrast to her white counterpart Cheryl, is portrayed as an exoticized Other in various ways. Not only does tropicalization embed itself in the characters of the film, but it also appears through the cinematic elements used in the biopic. When Cheryl and Lupe sit together in the restaurant, the former, representative of the mainstream character, serves as a stark contrast to the latter. Lupe's Otherness is signified through the bright hues of her apparel, her accented English, and a colorful personality.

Tropicalization not only appears through the physique and personality of Lupe, but it also becomes apparent through the use of music selected to set the tone in different scenes. To illustrate, in a scene where Coach White dines with the Díaz family, "Watermelon Man," an Afro-Cuban jazz song, plays in the scene of Coach White being served copious helpings of enchiladas in the Díaz household. This scene presents a tropicalized flavor of *Latinidad*. In other words, "Watermelon Man" performed and written by Mongo Santamaría, a percussionist of Cuban descent, musically captures the contours of Afro-Cuban jazz rather than a Mexican-America uniqueness. The trumpets and percussion evoke a Caribbean setting even though the actions transpire in a humble home in California and the characters are of Mexican descent. As a result, the idiosyncrasies of being a "Mexican Latino" become erased with the incorporation of a "Cuban Latino." Such a scene possibly reveals the homogeneous nature of *Latinidad* as sketched by Disney filmmakers in the U.S. mainstream. A salsa-infused scene, in its effort to accentuate an aura of Mexicanness, fails because it paints a portrait of a Caribbean identity. The methodical insertion of this song unveils how the director sees *Latinidad* and thus inadvertently, or perhaps purposefully, influences the biopic spectator to view *Latinidad* from his or her frame of reference.

As has been mentioned in the previous chapter, Antonio Banderas has come to represent all shades of *Latinidad* in cinema. Along the same lines, as evidenced in this scene and other films, salsa music has become falsely emblematic of most of Latin America. In order to capture Mexicanness, the musical stylings of Regional Mexican Music might have made this scene more authentically Mexican-American. With roots in rural Mexico, this wide genre consists of various subgenres, such as duranguense, mariachi, banda, norteño, ranchera, and Tejano music. One of these genres might have better captured the Mexicanness within *Latinidad* because of Mexican-American specificity.

Through my explanation of the usage of the song "Watermelon Man," I described a scene where tropicalization appears as a Latina/o trope in *McFarland, USA* but now I aim to illustrate how Mexican-Amercan specificity is illustrated in *Spare Parts.* In one particular scene, a student explains to Principal Lowry that he wants to rewrite the school song as a *corrido* in Spanish. He explains the types of instruments he would use and even sings his rendition of the school song:

STUDENT: I was thinking of getting an accordion...

PRINCIPAL LOWRY: No. We are not changing the school anthem to a nacho corrida.

STUDENT: Narcocorrido. We can get a tambura. It'd be fun. Tambura, tuba, accordion, tololoche. You don't like tambura? (*Spare Parts,* 49:58-50:07)

I argue that a *corrido*, with its beginning centuries ago, would be a better alternative to capturing Mexican-Americanness than salsa music. A *corrido*, a quintessentially Mexican music genre popular among Mexican-Americans, is essentially a ballad of conflict which "corresponds to one of the oldest musical traditions in Mexico. It consists of narrating real or fictitious stories based on events that wound the sensibility of the people" (Mendoza 1954). *Corridos* evoke a long-standing history from the time of the conquest to the Chicano Movement and finally to the

present day. This genre captures the cultural identity of Mexican-Americans in a way that describes the contours of their unique history. In *Mexican Ballads, Chicano Poems* (1991) José Limón explains that "[the corrido] exerted a…creative influence on Mexican-American writers. It was in the Mexican North and in the U.S. Southwest (hereafter, the Border) with their intimate ties of geography, population, and culture that the Mexican corrido flowered" (9).

References to *corridos* have also appeared in poetry from the Chicano Movement. Rodolfo (Corky) Gonzales explains the basics of the corrido in "Yo Soy Joaquín" from 1967:

The Corridos tell the tales/

Of life and death/

Of tradition/

Legends old and new/

Of joy/

Of pain and sorrow/

Of the people…of who I am. (261-266)

In *McFarland, USA*, the *corrido* could have been deployed in order to tell the stories of Mexican-Americans in the community of McFarland. Even though the biographical film *McFarland, USA* sketches Latina/os in a new light, the trope of the tropicalized Latina/o endures, demonstrating a need for a reexamination of how Latina/os are portrayed in film. One way to accomplish a more heterogeneous vision of Mexican-Americans is by studying the specificity of Mexican-American cultural elements and inserting these cultural nuances in such a way that they are more authentic to Mexican-Americans rather than Latina/os as a whole.

In sum, *corridos* capture a particular history of Mexican-Americans and regional peculiarities that become musically erased with the incorporation of salsa. César Jesús Burgos

Dávila explains the long history of the *corrido*, emphasizing that the genre appeared before and after the conquest of Mexico and prevailed through other eras, from student movements to border conflicts (97-98). Songs from this genre narrate the lived experiences of people under oppression.

Different renditions of the American Dream have appeared in cinema but have previously been associated with constituents of the white mainstream. In *McFarland, USA*, the American Dream is adopted by the filmmaker and used to validate Mexican-Americanness as an equally valid component of Americana. Jennifer Hochschild describes the importance of defining the concept of the American Dream from the vantage point of inclusion in her book *Facing Up to the American Dream: Race, Class, and the Soul of the Nation.* The notion of the American Dream in *McFarland, USA* is portrayed by a cross-country team composed of Mexican-Americans. When describing the American Dream, J. Emmett Winn explains that,

> Mobility in the American Dream is about a person who elevates himself or herself as a result of hard work and individual endeavor. This mobility is not measured in strict economic terms, for it is about more than just money--it is about people making better lives for themselves. (2)

In *McFarland, USA*, Coach White and his working-class cross-country runners catapult themselves to an improved quality of life. By focusing on the intricacies of running, the runners develop a level of discipline that extends into other areas of their lives. Most of the runners attend college and return to McFarland in order to give back to the community that nurtured them.

The rags-to-riches American Dream narrative in biographical films has appeared for decades on a recurring basis in Hollywood: *October Sky* (1999), *Forrest Gump* (1994), *Pursuit of*

Happiness (2006). Two films that I have already mentioned, *La Bamba* (1987) and *Selena* (1999) represent an achieved sense of upward mobility regardless of class. In these musical biopics, Ritchie Valens and Selena use their musical talent to gain entry into a different socioeconomic class than the one into which they were born. This "rags-to-riches" perspective has been a successful Hollywood formula for decades, as evidenced by box office sales. J. Emmett Winn calls this American Dream narrative "moralizing mobility" because working-class members achieve upward mobility "through their admirable motives and hard work" (12).

In contrast to this "rags-to-riches" notion, *McFarland, USA* (2015) Coach White's American Dream entails helping members of the working class succeed, resulting in his own redemption because his runners have helped him rediscover the meaning of life. Winn has labeled this type of American Dream as "moralizing the material" and explains that particular circumstances bring together people from different socioeconomic backgrounds, with the lower-class character teaching the upper-class character how to lead a meaningful life (13). In a previous scene, Coach White forgets to pick up his daughter's birthday cake. While he has succeeded as the coach of a successful cross-country team, his role as a father has become secondary. After being exposed to the daily routines of his runners, he learns to reprioritize, placing more worth on his family. Before the state cross-country meet, the community of McFarland is shown saluting the flag while singing along to the words of "The Star-Spangled Banner." A close-up scene of the coach reveals a reflective gaze while "the rockets' red glare" part of the anthem commences. The scene then paints a portrait of the most fulfilling times he spent training his cross-country runners. They are shown huddled together, running in slow motion around the local prison, and gathered around enjoying each other's company. The anthem ends with a close up of Thomas Valles singing "and the home of the brave." Elements of

production offer a glimpse into the way that *Latinidad* is being sketched in new ways by the film industry. For example, the auditory beauty of the anthem associated with patriotism paints a new portrait of *Latinidad,* recognizing and validating the Latino runners as constituents of the cultural fabric of the United States.

The national anthem of the United States has been reappropriated in this biopic, capturing a level of spirituality that has been achieved by helping underprivileged runners realize their potential. William Epstein describes the concept of *gesture of strategic patriotic memory,* which appears when certain patriotic symbols, such as the U.S. flag or the national anthem, are employed to depict a patriotic image of the United States (13). Rather than continuing with this concept, the filmmaker associates this patriotic song with the success of Mexican-Americans, accepting and identifying them as integral constituents of Americana. Spectators can sense that the McFarland runners not only grew under the tutelage of Coach White, but that "Blanco," a moniker affectionately given by his cross-country runners, also learned how to be a better-rounded family man than what he had previously been. In this scene, the music and emotions merge together to capture the sentimentality of their shared lives.

The strategic inclusion of music by Los Tigres del Norte during the opening scene of the film illustrates the specificity of Mexican-American identity. Rather than defaulting to the usage of salsa as the symbol of all Latina/os in the United States, the musical genre of norteña music, as well as the lyrics, contextualize the concept of Mexican-American identity as it will be illustrated in the biopic. Los Tigres del Norte, the norteña band from Sinaloa, Mexico, has composed numerous songs about border culture as a lived experience. In "De América Yo Soy," the topic of reclaiming an identity that has been denied by people of "el norte" is tied to the

invention of *Latinidad* as cinematically depicted in *McFarland, USA*, as the White family drives to McFarland:

> Haber nacido en América, es como una bendición/
>
> Llena de bellas imágenes, que alegra el corazón/
>
> Mosaico de mil colores, bellas mujeres y flores,/
>
> Para los pueblos de América, les canto mi canción./
>
> De América, yo soy. De América, yo soy./
>
> Del color de la tierra yo he nacido/
>
> Por herencia mi idioma es castellano,/
>
> Los del norte dicen que soy Latino,/
>
> No me quieren decir americano,/ (*Los Tigres del Norte*, 1-9)
>
> *English version:*
>
> Having been born in America, is a blessing/
>
> Filled with beautiful imagery, it delights the heart/
>
> A mosaic of a million colors, beautiful women and flowers,/
>
> For the people in America, I sing you my song./
>
> From America, I am. From America, I am./
>
> I have been born from the color of the land/
>
> Through my heritage my language is Spanish/
>
> Those from the North call me Latino/
>
> They don't want to call me American./ (my own translation)

In sum, the Mexican-Americans call themselves Americans while recognizing that mainstream Americans, from their perspective, do not want to do the same. In so doing, Mexican-Americans

reclaim their space within Americana. Keeping with the defining elements of a *corrido*, in this song there is the preservation of identity and honor, the importance of community, and above all, there is the strength of the *mexicano* against the oppressive forces of dominant Anglo society. The border *corrido* most often pertains to the heroic struggle of one man, *el mexicano,* defending his rights and liberties against the oppressive forces of the dominant culture, which most often take the form Anglo society. While the hero of the *corrido* may be representative of a larger social struggle, the hero himself is usually concerned with the preservation of his personal honor. As is evident in the lyrics, the *corrido* narrator in Los Tigres del Norte includes himself in Americana, noting that he is not defined by those who do not want to refer to him as American.

In the movie scene that introduces the community of McFarland, the spectator experiences the first glimpse of the predominantly Latino community through the eyes of the White family members, which in an ironic twist is their actual surname, as they drive their station wagon through the town. First, the empty fields are shown, followed by laborers picking crops in another part of the community, and then humble homes are shown. Julie voices her opinion after looking around the neighborhood skeptically and saying, "Dad, please tell me that you took the wrong exit." The younger daughter chimes in by asking if they are in Mexico.

As the Whites enter their new home, they see a Virgin painted on the wall in the interior of the home. All of these scenes visually set the stage for a specific slice of Latina/o life in a small California community. After walking around the house, Julie calls McFarland a dump. In the next scene, when the Whites go to a restaurant, low riders drive by, instilling fear in them. Jim White instructs his family not to leave his side. In his mind, he assumes that the low riders pose a danger to his family. By criminalizing them, he demonstrates a fear of a culture that he does not yet understand.

In these scenes, the White family views Latina/os as constituting the Other. Over time, Latina/os are no longer put into this category. The interpersonal relationship that Coach White develops with his Latino students serves as the gateway to releasing his preconceived notions of Latina/o identity. This relationship begins with him convincing Johnny Samaniego to help find members to be on the McFarland cross-country team.

Another cinematic technique used to illustrate Latinness is the use of the Virgin throughout the biographical film. Not only is she shown on the interior wall of the White home, but she also appears on the hood of Javi's low rider. The face of his girlfriend is painted in the likeness of the Virgin, with the virginal aura around her face. The filmmakers have elected to showcase spirituality and its inextricable connection to ethnicity as an integral component of being Latina/o in McFarland. When the runners qualify for state, they kneel down as a team and give a prayer of thanks. In one scene as Coach White attempts to paint over the image of the Virgin sketched in his living room, his youngest daughter tells him, "Don't even think about it." This demonstrates the acceptance and integration of spirituality in their lives that have occurred as a direct result of their residing in McFarland. As a result, reverence toward the iconic image is not specific to only the Mexican nation but extends to practitioners of faith in the United States.

The apparition of the Mexican Virgin of Guadalupe has been revered for centuries from the time Juan Diego supposedly had a vision of her in 1531. Elaine A. Pena in *Performing Piety: Making Space Sacred with the Virgin of Guadalupe* states the following:

> Guadalupanas/os from Miguel Hidalgo to César Chávez, from Emiliano Zapata, to Alma López have used her iconic strength to spark upheaval, foster civil rights and gender

> equality, strengthen political campaigns, create art, preserve identity, and build communities. (9)

Now, the reverence toward the Mexican Virgin of Guadalupe has manifested itself as a leitmotiv in *McFarland, USA.* She becomes a bridge between the McFarland Latina/os and the White family. Not only is she valued by the Mexican-Americans of the community, but she comes to be revered by the members of the White family. The visual iconography of the Virgin has a profound significance on the Mexican-American community. As an image, she becomes immediately recognizable to the view because she elicits an emotional response rooted in a common history and lived experience. It is a kind of profoundly meaningful portraiture, in which the gaze of the viewer mirrors the gaze of the subject *ad infinitum.*

The concept of Mexican-American identity and a connection to geography has been previously explored in Mexican-American studies. Author Rudolfo Anaya, also known as the Father of Chicano Literature, underscores a spiritual connection between geography and its inhabitants in his best-selling fictional book, *Bless Me Última*. Throughout the book, Última, Antonio's mentor, emphasizes the spiritual connection that exists between Mexican-Americans and the llano of New Mexico. Along the same vein, in *McFarland, USA*, scenes of the land in California reinforce the role that geography plays in the daily lives of the McFarland residents. The athletes train regularly for mountainous terrain by running up and down hills of almonds cloaked in black tarps. This daily routine prepares them for the state championship and is also reminiscent of the plots of land where they toil as crop pickers. The same land where they pick crops in the wee hours of the morning and the late evenings is also the same terrain that guides them toward a more prosperous future. The McFarland flatlands, then, serve as both a backdrop of their past as well as a place of spiritual development. The posse comprised of the Díaz

brothers and company matures under the tutelage of their running and life coach. The flatlands of McFarland are a place of solace and spiritual development for the runners, offering not only a training ground but a place that has come to signify spiritual enlightenment for them. In the beginning of the biopic, the runners are shown in the fields with their families, eking out a living. Throughout the film, Coach White and his runners are shown bonding in the fields of McFarland as they talk about life and the importance of hard work.

Coach Jim White represents a modern-day reincarnation of Última in *McFarland, USA* by helping his runners realize their spiritual connection to geography. Rudolfo Anaya in *Bless Me, Última* explains the impact that Antonio's mentor had on his life: "I learned from her that there was beauty in the time of day and in the time of night, and that there was peace in the river and in the hills. She taught me to listen in the fulfillment of its time. My soul grew under her careful guidance" (15). In consonance with this idea, José Cardenas, one of Coach White's runners, pens a poem in one of his classes about achieving a level of spiritual enlightenment in the fields:

> We fly like blackbirds through the orange groves,
> Floating on a warm wind
> When we run, we own the earth
> The land is ours.
> We speak the birds' language.
> Not immigrants no more
> Not stupid Mexicans
> When we run, our spirits fly.
> We speak to the gods

When we run,

We are the gods. (*McFarland, USA,* 1:14:40-1:15:01)

Coach White, then, helps his students realize the spirituality of their landscape in the same way that Última helps Antonio in *Bless Me, Última.* In another scene, Coach White takes his runners to the ocean for the first time after they qualify for state. They gaze at the sea, awestruck by the panorama in front of them. This scene is symbolic of the possibilities available to the runners as they become more successful. They jump ecstatically into the vast sea, another place of peace and fulfillment that they have earned to see as a result of their hard work. At the end of the biopic, Coach White motivates his runners by reminding them of the role that the fields have played in their lives:

> **COACH WHITE:** They don't get up at dawn like you and go to work in the fields. Right? They don't go to school all day and then go back to those same fields. That's what you do. And then you come out with me and you run 8 miles, 10 miles, and you take on...you take on even more pain. These kids don't do what you do. They can't even imagine it...You kids do it every day. And your parents hope they can do it every day, and they'll do it for a lifetime if it means a better life for you. You guys are super-human. What you endure just to be here, to get a shot at this, the kind of privilege that someone like me takes for granted? (*McFarland, USA,* 1:50:54-1:51:58)

The McFarland fields, then, represent a place of spiritual identity integral to the identity of the runners, much in the same way that the llano of New Mexico is for Antonio in *Bless Me, Última.*

Continuing with the theme of spirituality, the film depends heavily on the use of visual iconography of the Mexican Virgin of Guadalupe. In various scenes of *McFarland, USA* the

mural of the Virgin appears, first as a stranger to the Whites and then as an image that they grow to love.

"The Star-Spangled Banner" serves as an emotional backdrop to Coach White's attainment of the American Dream. While the national anthem plays, he visualizes his experiences with the runners. The athletes are shown running in slow motion while Coach White is shown encouraging them and bonding with them. By including him in their community, they have helped to instill in him a renewed sense of purpose. Because of the symbiotic relationship between the coach and his runners, this biopic probably does not qualify as a white savior film. Niki Caro, the screenwriter of *McFarland, USA* contends that it was important not to repeat the white savior narrative. In an interview with Carolina Moreno, she said that, "We were very conscious of not making a white savior movie, and you could have with the material, but it was really important for us that he be a flawed guy who was ultimately redeemed by the community" (*Moreno*, par. 3).

McFarland, USA disrupts the conventional filmic narrative of the American Dream. This dream can be attained by helping members of underserved communities, such as migrant worker families and other impoverished populations. The biographical film makes the hardships faced by Latina/os visible by drawing attention to contemporary social issues, demonstrating the possibilities of disrupting the cycle of poverty in a family. According to the final captions of the film, many of the cross-country runners returned to McFarland in order to serve their communities as teachers. The title *McFarland, USA* in contrast to the titles of the other biopics in this study, communicates the importance of a communal identity. Mexican-Americans traditionally emphasize the importance of family relationships as crucial to the attainment of success.

Popular culture has a way of molding public memory by transmitting the dominant ideology of its constituents. Anyone who has seen *Up in Smoke* (1975) or *The George López Show*, a television program that aired from 2002 to 2007, is familiar with the song "Low Rider," an homage to the Mexican-American subculture of lowriding. The song reached number one on the Billboard Charts in 1975. The lyrics, written by War, are as follow:

All my friends know the lowrider/

The low rider is a little higher/

Lowrider drives a little slower/

Lowrider is a real goer/

Lowrider knows every street yeah!/

Lowrider is the one to meet yeah!/

Lowrider don't use no gas now/

Lowrider don't drive too fast/

Take a little trip/

Take a little trip/

Take a little trip and see/

Take a little trip/

Take a little trip/

Take a little trip with me./ (*War,* 1-14)

This song has aided in creating a negative image of the lowrider in public memory. Negative associations have come to be associated with Mexican-Americanness, because, for example, the lyrics "the low rider is a little higher" and "take a little trip" imply that the low rider is a drug user. The biographical film *McFarland, USA*, rather than perpetuating this representation,

presents lowriders in a more relatable way. Instead of lowriding being stereotypically depicted as gangster-related, lowriding in *McFarland, USA* centers around the importance of family. The representation of low riding as a family-friendly phenomenon, then, deconstructs the notion that criminalization and lowriders are interconnected. To illustrate, after Julie White's quinceañera, Javi and the other low riders use their cars to parade her around the town. Rather than portraying low riders from the perspective of members not included in this group, they appear from the perspective of Mexican-American low riders themselves. After Coach White apologizes to Javi for his reaction after seeing him for the first time, Javi says, "They are going to notice the paint job [if we commit a crime]. We are just a car club, man."

Mexican-Americans have been self-customizing muscle cars since the 1940s. The cultural phenomenon of lowriding emerged as a means of self-expression in East Los Angeles barrios. Charles M. Tatum observes that media coverage in the 1950s, due to a contentious relationship with Mexican-Americans, aided in the criminalization of lowriders. He points out that "media coverage suggested that the cruisers were gangs of roving criminals threatening white residents. Although it is probably true that there were some gang members among the lowriders, the media coverage grossly exaggerated these claims to the point of causing a public outcry" (11). In the 1980s, low riders became widespread in the California Central Valley. The role of the low rider in the Mexican-American community manifests itself in *McFarland, USA.* As far as the image of the low rider relates to the image sketching of Latina/os by Hollywood, he reflects the expected Mexican-American image as set forth by not only the mainstream filmmakers, or non-Latinos, but also by the non-Latino spectators. Phenotypically, he fulfills the expected appearance of the Mexican-American; he has brown skin and greased hair.

Although aspects of Latina/o identity are represented in more positive ways, stereotypes of Latina/os appear throughout this biographical film. The connection of low riding with criminalization becomes apparent in Jim White's reaction. As he leaves a restaurant after dinner with his family, he spots Javi and his group of low riding friends parked outside. He quickly becomes anxious, hastening his steps and telling his family to get in the car as soon as possible. The term *lowrider* refers to the vehicle and its driver. Luis Plascencia describes the perceptions that others hold toward lowriders as follows:

> The presence of highly ornate cars with multicolor paint jobs, crushed velvet interiors, hydraulic suspension systems, and numerous other features--low-riders--has become a common sight in the metropolitan areas of the Southwest. Their ubiquitousness in parks, boulevards, and shopping centers, as they ride low and slow, elicits perceptions of either aversion or admiration on the part of the bystanders. (141)

Javi's low rider displays a likeness of his girlfriend, Lupe, emblazoned on the hood of his red car. Her self-portrait is reminiscent of the Virgin of Guadalupe, which is an image that appears throughout the biopic. Rather than becoming a living embodiment of a misogynistic Mexican man, Javi strives to live a harmonious life with meaningful relationships. By having a painting of his girlfriend designed similarly to a Virgin of Guadalupe image, he demonstrates the level to which he elevates her status in his personal life. He equates his love of his girlfriend to being on the same level as a saint. Coincidentally, or perhaps not, his girlfriend's name is Lupe, linking her name to the venerated Virgin of Guadalupe. Javi, then, rather than being androcentric and regarding his significant other as inferior to him, regards her in spiritual terms, worthy of praise and recognition to all the onlookers of his prized lowrider. In other words, he

fits the mold of the "brown Mexican" as it has come to be expected by the Hollywood film industry.

McFarland, USA and *Spare Parts* reflect the shift toward contemporary issues in films centered on Latina/os. In recent years, instead of focusing on recovering a lost heritage, such as in *Selena* and *La Bamba*, Latina/o identity is framed around undocumented migration. These trends echo the complicated matrix of social issues facing Latina/os who reside in the United States. An estimated 65,000 undocumented students graduate from high school in the United States every year according to a 2006 Pew Hispanic Survey by Jeffrey Passel.

The undocumented population faces a variety of legal and social challenges not encountered by their United States citizen counterparts. They are faced with the daily possibility of raids and deportation by Immigration and Customs Enforcement. These raids affect not only the departed individuals and their families but also learning institutions as well as entire communities (Shine and Golisky 2009). The psychological and social issues faced by the undocumented have only recently begun to be explored in Latino-centric biographical films. The appearance of the obstacles faced by these Latina/os in film reflect an acknowledgement of the daily realities of a growing demographic in the United States.

September 11, 2001, altered current-day migration discourse. The terrorist attacks carried out by Islamic extremists against the United States on September 11, 2001, altered current-day migration discourse. Migration from all over the world became perceived as terroristic and categorized as an extension of other crimes. Furthermore, border security intensified to such an extent that the Department of Homeland Security was created, advanced security technology was implemented, and new jobs were created for border patrol agents. In his article "Constructing security on the U.S.-Mexico Border" Jason Ackleson states that,

> Constructed' is not taken to mean only how physical security—such as agents, fortifications, surveillance, and the like are deployed—but also the nature of the social environment in which actors, like United States government elites and federal agencies, formulate solutions and then take security actions against perceived 'threats' or 'risks" (166).

As is evident, security can be observed in a tangible manner, but problems arise when those in power interpret security in a more abstract manner through personal formulations of criminalization, such as the formation of prejudices against ethnic groups.

Spare Parts relates the true story of a robotics team from Carl Hayden Community High School comprised of four undocumented Mexican-American students who defeated M.I.T. in a national robotics competition post September 11. The setting of the story is significant from a contemporary perspective because of Arizona Senate Bill 1070, also known as the Support Our Law Enforcement and Safe Neighborhoods Act, which was a law aimed at curbing immigration signed on April 23, 2010. This piece of legislation permitted officers to arrest any person without a warrant if it was believed that the person committed a crime. Nigel Duara explains the following:

> The law contained four major elements aimed at lessening the number of immigrants in the state illegally through attrition. It compelled police to ask for papers and allowed officers to arrest a person without a warrant if the officer believed the person has committed an offense that makes them deportable.
>
> The law also made it a crime to fail to carry registration papers and for people in the country illegally to solicit work. (Duara, pars. 15 & 16)

Such a state law exists in abstract terms until it affects the daily lives of those impacted by the legal measure. The biographical film *Spare Parts* reveals the everyday reality encountered by undocumented Mexican-Americans in Arizona due to Arizona Senate Bill 1070. Oscar Vasquez, who crossed the border with his family when he was a child, wants to enlist in the Army at the age of 18. The recruiter with whom he speaks, however, informs him that he will be unable to do so without proof of documentation. Furthermore, he advises him to avoid government offices:

> ARMY RECRUITER: Don't go presenting yourself to any government office [without a birth certificate] for your own well-being. You've heard of Immigration Customs Enforcement, right, son?
>
> OSCAR: ICE. Yes, sir. (*Spare Parts*, 4:25-4:36)

Later on in the biopic, the recruiter visits Oscar after ICE raids the office of the Army and confiscates paperwork that lists his home address. Consequently, he avoids his house and sleeps in the bathroom of the high school. This shows the extent to which Arizona Senate Bill 1070 hinders his job prospects and instills an impending sense of fear in him on a daily basis. Mexican-Americanness in this biopic, then, does not emphasize a reclamation of a lost heritage or show other tropes examined in biopics from the 1980s and 1990s. Now, the themes center on political issues confronting undocumented Mexican-Americans in a post-9/11 era.

The following quotes from different characters illustrate firsthand accounts experienced by undocumented Mexican-Americans during the time in which it was filmed:

> OSCAR: I was six, and my mom had me and my cousin in the back of the van. We must have spent like eight hours hunched in there, just trying not to throw up or cry.
>
> Once we crossed the border, they got us all burgers. (*Spare Parts*, 33:29-33:42)

***

MRS. VAZQUEZ: You think they're gonna let you work or go to college if they won't let you serve? (*Spare Parts*, 40:46-40:54)

***

PRINCIPAL LOWRY: I suggest you stick to the speed limit with four undocumented kids in the back. (*Spare Parts*, 45:08-45:16)

***

LORENZO'S FATHER: You wanna be his father, huh? Well, let me tell you what that means. That means you gotta be there every day even if you have nothing, huh? And you got to be there and hide him when ICE comes and knocks on your door and takes your wife. (*Spare Parts*, 1:00:19-1:00:35)

While the 1980s and 1990s biopics in this study focused on the preservation of a lost heritage, the biopics in this chapter examine contemporary issues faced by undocumented Mexican-Americans in the United States. Such a shift in filmic themes mirrors the xenophobia that transpired as a result of 9/11.

Few, if any, depictions of issues faced by undocumented Latina/os in the United States have appeared in biographical films. The biopic *Spare Parts* contributes to an accurate representation of Latina/os by including the narrative of undocumented migration in a major motion picture. Throughout the course of the film, the everyday reality of unauthorized citizens, such as a constant fear of deportation, becomes apparent. Rather than relegating Latina/os to recurring stereotypical roles, this way of representing Latina/os diversifies and more accurately represents the lives of some Latina/os in the United States. *Spare Parts* offers a glimpse into the microcosm of the undocumented population. By showing the story Oscar Vásquez's life plans as

an undocumented student, the gaze of the spectator is redirected and refocused on a narrative previously not given sufficient screen time in the context of biographical films. Oscar experiences difficulties in trying to enlist for the Army. The topic of undocumented Latina/os, now in 2019, has been thrust into the national limelight. *Spare Parts*, then, is a timely commentary on a present situation.

Whereas *La Bamba* and *Selena* paint a portrait of a resistance and recovering one's heritage, recent films, such as *Spare Parts*, steer the Mexican-American identity conversation in a different direction. This biofilm reflects pressing issues faced by Latina/os in recent years, namely the issue of being undocumented in the United States. Even though accepting one's heritage is important and was illustrated in films in the 1980s and 1990s, this is a shift in the way Latina/os have been characterized in recent years.

Latina/os have been "symbolically annihilated" in mainstream cinema. George Gerbner coined the term "symbolic annihilation" in order to explain the void of accurate representation on television. He sums up the essence of this term as follows: "Representation in the fictional world signifies social existence; absence means symbolic annihilation" (182). This chapter recognizes the ways in which *Spare Parts* combats this absence by giving visibility to the contemporary issue of undocumented migration, resulting in a type of concrete inclusion of Latina/os in biographical films. The plight of the undocumented has been depicted in recent years.

The subject of intelligence has become racialized in film, with Latina/os rarely appearing as possessing high levels of intellect. Instead, Asian American conform to the model minority myth, which is the perception that Asians are the most successful, most high-achieving immigrants. The topic of racialized intelligence has been depicted previously in *Stand and*

Deliver, a biopic that has been previously mentioned in this study. *Spare Parts*, a biographical film that grossed $3.6 million dollars, has continued the filmic representation of brainiac Latina/os. In a Huffington Post interview with Marc Lamont, George López describes the struggle of intelligent Latina/os:

> In our culture and in culture sometimes they make you feel a little be weird for being smart... but we are intelligent people and our dreams matter regardless of if you speak with an accent and people think that that makes you not intelligent...Around the world and in Europe, if you speak multiple languages they look at that as a benefit, but in the United States if you speak Spanish, they look at you like you're not speaking English. We're woefully behind in a lot of things and one is perception. (*Lamont*, par. 9)

López points out the way that Mexican Americans have been racialized in the United States in contrast to other parts of the world. Continuing with the subject of the racialization of intelligence in popular culture, Asian Americans are seen as the minorities for other minorities to emulate. The stereotype of the "model minority" is comprised of the perception that Asian-Americans are the highest-achieving minority in the United States because of "moods or conditions of society rather than upon any real characteristics of the stereotyped group" (Sue and Kitano 1973). Furthermore, this stereotype depicts academic success as being directly correlated with ethnicity even though other factors, such as socioeconomic status, also play a role in assessing success (Hartlep, 2012). The belief of Asians being high achievers has become entrenched in public memory while the image of the Mexicans as low achievers has remained encoded in public perception as well.

Spare Parts creates a narrative of dignity for Latina/os, honoring their success and brain power in a way that is underrepresented in cinema. Rather than showing them in a monolithic

sense, this film contributes to Anzaldúa's concept of "plural personalities" (1987). Jessica Vázquez has coined the term "complimentary othering," which is a form of racialization that "occurs when people consider Mexican Americans as exceptions to the racist assumptions of underachievement, intelligence, success, and beauty...The implicit suggestion of 'racial othering' is that the person being complimented does not serve as a positive example of the group but rather needs to be distinguished" (57).

Spare Parts shatters the perception of Mexican-Americans as underachievers. The plot of this biopic is based on an article entitled "La Vida Robot" by Joshua Davis. In Davis' article, he explains the diverse nature of the robotics team at Carl Hayden Community High School. The following excerpt from the article captures the "plural personalities" notion mentioned by Anzaldúa:

> Oscar Vasquez was a born leader. A senior, he'd been in ROTC since ninth grade…He introduced his teammates: Cristian, the brainiac; Lorenzo, the *vato loco* who had a surprising aptitude for mechanics; and 18-year-old Luis Aranda, the fourth member of the crew….The tether man, responsible for the pickup and release of what would be a 100-pound robot. (*Davis,* par. 17)

The concept of *Latinidad*, as explored in this study, takes on a range of meanings. Each Latino on the robotics team possesses a different kind of aptitude that contributes to the success of the team as a whole. Additionally, Lorenzo is described as being both a *vato loco* and being adept at mechanics, which paints a portrait of the multiplicity of identity. These newfound Latina/o embodiments contribute to the narrative of the diversity of Latina/os in the United States. Recognizing the diversity of Latina/os, then, is the first step to combating age-old, stereotypical notions of Latina/os in cinema. One can be a *vato loco* and an intellectual.

Adaptation scholar Robert Stam encourages a stance when approaching film adaptations that diverges from scholars who focus on fidelity to the original text. He emphasizes the importance of approaching cinema in reference to its multitrack nature rather than focusing on filmic fidelity to the written text. He contends that "literary writing turns into the audio-visual-kinetic-performative energy of the adaptation" (13). In other words, the filmic sketch takes a life of its own that deserves an analysis without comparing and contrasting it to the original written version. In consonance with this idea, Marie-Laurie Ryan in *Narrative Across Media: The Languages of Storytelling,* explains the evolutionary nature of a narrative when expressed via visual, electronic, and musical means. As a film appeals to the various senses of its audience, the story becomes reconfigured from its narrative. Visual elements, then, depict a different portrayal than the written text. In *Spare Parts,* the soundtrack, the acting, and the usage of the Spanish language fuse together in order to produce a polyphonic work. Many elements combine to capture the varied flavor of Mexican-Americanness. The following section demonstrates this portrayal of the distinctiveness of Mexican-American identity.

The inclusion of the Spanish language and elements of Mexican culture are incorporated throughout *McFarland, USA.* This demonstrates that contemporarily speaking, adhering to previous filmic norms need not be used for the commercial success of a cinematic work of art. More specifically, the usage of English is no longer considered a necessary cinematographic norm. In *McFarland, USA* the film remains true to its border culture by including English as well as Spanish. This bilingual world represents a reality of Mexican-American culture in the Southwest. Also worthy of mentioning here is that the biopic was filmed in McFarland, its place of origin, so by including Spanish as part of the dialogue between its characters, the film remains authentic to the language elements of its border inhabitants.

Niki Caro has directed a biographical film in which Spanish is used without subtitles in an English-dominant narrative, being authentic to the language elements of border inhabitants. The incorporation and usage of Spanish illustrates an apparent difference exists between private and public spheres. Choosing to incorporate English in cinema is a technique deployed by filmmakers because they aim to appeal to the majority of the audience, which is comprised mostly of English-speakers. However, in recent years, those who practice the craft of cinema haven taken a Spanish-dominant spectatorship into account. While overusing English throughout Mexico-centered *Frida* shows an inaccurate portrayal of the primary language of communication, the strategic usage of Spanish in certain scenes of *McFarland, USA* echoes the real-life realities of Latina/os living in the United States. In one scene, Thomas Valles relates the possibilities of his post high-school life to his father in Spanish:

THOMAS VALLES: 'Apá, nos está yendo muy bien. Coach cree que podemos ir a las finales. Alomejor puedo hasta entrar al colegio.

MR. VALLES: Colegio?

THOMAS VALLES: Sí.

MR. VALLES: Sabes que? Saca la cara de esos libros. Van a arruinar a tus ojos. Nadie necesita un libro en el campo. (*McFarland, USA*, 1:18:07-1:18:30)

This is just one of many scenes that shows Spanish used in the domestic sphere between relatives. When they are in the comfort of their homes, they choose to speak in their native tongue. Rather than choosing to show this scene in English, the filmmakers opted to show the intimacy of life at home through the use of the Spanish language. Although English could have been used in this scene to appeal to the language of the mainstream audience, Director Niki Caro recognized not only the authenticity of Spanish in the domestic sphere but also the importance of

recognizing the ever-increasing Spanish language spectatorship in the United States. The inclusion of the native tongue of the characters gives the biopic a universal appeal, which helps to attract more spectators because they relate to the characters portrayed authentically in their environment.

Mr. Valles cannot envision a life in which his son enters the sphere of higher education. Instead, he predestines him to the same type of laborer lifestyle by telling him that nobody needs books in the fields. López, a Mexican-American, plays the part of a fictitious Mexican-American character.

The biopic *Spare Parts*, like *César Chávez*, was produced by Pantelion. As this study has previously mentioned, Pantelion is a Televisa-Lionsgate joint venture, which takes pride in calling itself "the first Latino Hollywood studio" and targets Hispanics in the United States. When the time came to adapt the contents of the article in *Spare Parts*, screenwriter Elissa Matsueda made some alterations to the original text. Rather than including the two robotics team leaders mentioned in the article by Davis, Elissa Matsueda's created one character that would make it to the filmic representation, Fredi Cameron.

Screenwriter Elissa Matsueda wrote a screenplay based on an article by Joshua David in *Wired Magazine*. In an interview with Jeff Bonnett, Matsueda explains the inspiration behind the screenplay:

> I read [an article about the students] in WIRED Magazine – which was only about five pages – and had an instant emotional connection to it. These students were the ultimate underdogs, being undocumented and having little to no support or resources. I knew immediately it was a story I wanted to tell….particular story is bittersweet, though, because despite their successes, these young men were (and to some extent still are) held

> back by their immigration status, which is devastating to see. Part of the hope for this movie is that it puts a face on the immigration debate. I don't think you can watch their story and think these kids don't belong here. (*Bonnett*, par. 7)

The emotional connection resonates with a vast audience in the United States, making it a palpable contemporary issue. Undocumented students account for a large number of high school graduates every year. The effect of the injustice toward the undocumented has a ripple effect on their family members and society, which has been illustrated in this film through the ways that the undocumented have limited access to education and to the workforce. Unable to advance like their U.S. citizen counterparts, they cannot provide for their families, and they cannot easily become productive members who contribute to the U.S. economy.

Border scholar María Herrera-Sobek has identified *border aesthetics* as a phenomenon whereby the artist, rather than following the traditional definition of aestheticism, which basically means beauty for the sake of beauty, instead evokes a type of aestheticism that supports a political cause. In her article "Border Aesthetics: The Politics of Mexican Immigration in Film and Art," she defines this phenomenon as the "process by which the 'bellas artes' or fine arts and letters are used to seek, promote, and advance social justice. In aesthetic activism, the artist becomes politically engaged and uses aesthetic strategies in order to disrupt the master narratives of oppression…to alter institutionalized racism" (62). Based on this definition, *Spare Parts* constitutes a biographical film of the *border aesthetics* tradition. It emphasizes the point of pursuing an education in order to change an institutionalized body of discrimination. The filmmakers make a social commentary on the injustices experienced by undocumented populations in Arizona. A political cause supported in this biopic is reform for Arizona Senate Bill 1070 with the end goal of attaining social justice for those in the United States who cannot

obtain a driver's license, vote, or legally secure employment. *Spare Parts*, a title with polysemic value, refers not only to the parts used to create an underwater robot on a budget, but the biopic title also implies that undocumented migrants are viewed as elements to be easily discarded. In other words, one of the political commentaries in this film is that members of this population are treated as unnecessary "spare parts" in the United States.

The institution is set up in such a way that it oppresses undocumented students, and *Spare Parts* shows what is possible when a disempowered population is bestowed access to education.

Musical selections have been included as performances of Mexican-Americanness in *Spare Parts.* At the end of the movie, "Guerrero" by Fonseca plays. The first stanza and chorus are:

Soy lo que soy and I was born guerrero/

Y como el viento voy por el mundo entero/

It's who I am lo que me ven sin miedo/

In front of you I stand por amor yo muero/

Nada que perder/

As long as we can believe/

That we got something to live for/

We stand/

We fall/

We'll rise better/

Cause I was born/

Cause I was born/

Cause I was born/

Cause I was born guerrero/ (*Fonseca*, 1-14)

Signifiers of border culture appear in this song. The code switches from English to Spanish. The singer is a warrior, a modern-day empowered bandit, who is re-sketched within the social context of criminalized Mexican immigration in the state of Arizona.

In the first line, Fonseca sings, "I was born *guerrero*." In other words, I was born a *warrior*. Rather than the historically antagonistic connotations associated with the warrior stereotype, Fonseca imbues the warrior trope with a newfound meaning. Instead of appearing as the warrior who was sketched as the villain during the Mexican Revolution, the born warrior in 2015 represents strength. The goal of this song is to perform a modern-day Mexican-Americanness. Furthermore, neither the history nor the presence of Mexican-Americans in the United States can be erased:

No rules

We chase

You can't erase

Cause I was born guerrero. (*Fonseca*, 15-18)

A difference in the filmic portrayal of Mexican-American school culture can be observed before and after September 11, 2001. *Stand and Deliver,* released in 1988, rather than the politically-centered *Spare Parts* from 2015, is a biopic centered on ethnic pride and the importance of educational access for Latina/os. The first film grapples with Mexican-American film identity issues of its day while the latter cinematographic work centers on contemporary political issues experienced by undocumented Latina/os residing in the United States. The biographical film *Stand and Deliver* was based on real-life story of Jaime Escalante, a math

teacher of Bolivian descent who helped Mexican-Americans in East Los Angeles receive college credit through the Advanced Placement Calculus Exam. Edward James Olmos, a Mexican-American who also portrayed the role of Selena's father in her biopic, was nominated for a Golden Globe in this film.

Stand and Deliver shows identity as a negotiation between the maintenance of cultural roots and taking part in mainstream culture. Not only does it challenge previous Mexican-American gangster images, but it sets forth to present a Mexican-American narrative of cultural pride. In one scene, Escalante informs his students that their ancestors, the Mayans, devised the mathematical concept of zero. In one of the movie scenes during a math lesson, he says: "Did you know that neither the Greeks nor the Romans were capable of using the concept of zero? It was your ancestors, the Mayas, who first contemplated the concept of zero, the absence of value." Escalante, then, begins his trajectory to instill ethnic pride in his Mexican-American students from the barrio. By making a connection between their situation and their ancestors, he hopes they will feel a sense of ethnic pride.

Within the realm of the cinema of Latina/os, *Stand and Deliver* and *Spare Parts* contribute different perspectives on Latina/o identity in the United States. *Stand and Deliver* articulates a discourse on maintaining Mexican-American identity and resisting dominant culture. *Spare Parts* reflects *Latinidad* from the politicized vantage point of undocumented Mexican-Americans. Lastly, *McFarland, USA* reflects a hodgepodge of Mexican-American identity, such as spiritual connection to geography, reappropriation of iconic symbols

Stand and Deliver (1998) is a biographical film distributed by Director Ramón Menéndez and Producer Tom Musca through Warner Bros. Director Menéndez was born in Cuba and was raised in California. The film tells the story of Jaime Escalante, a Bolivian immigrant who

teaches barrio Latina/os at a high school in Los Angeles. As a result of this film, the story of Jaime Escalante and his AP Calculus students entered a national discussion about Latina/o identity. According to *Cahiers du Cinéma*, Hollywood is a "main instrument of the ideological super-structure of the United States" (499). Ideologies are formed in film and become ingrained in the psyche of those who watch them. Consciously and subconsciously, spectators form a perception of what it means to be Mexican-American or Latina/o. In other words, for the sake of this study, the ideology of Mexican-Americanness becomes influenced by a power structure that transmits a message of artificial Mexican-Americanness.

A Cuban director wrote a screenplay about a Bolivian immigrant played by a Mexican-American. This encapsulates the process of Hispanic homogenization in biographical films. Regardless of ethnic specificity, a generalized notion of Mexican-Americanness appears on the silver screen. The sketch of the Bolivian cannot be distinguished from the illustration of the Mexican-American.

This study has examined how the ethnic background of actors has contributed to or seems to detract from the concept of authenticity. I have asked if non-Mexican-Americans can succeed at portraying Mexican-American actors. In *Stand and Deliver*, James Olmos, a Mexican-American actor plays the role of Jaime Escalante, a Bolivian Hispanic. In the biopic, however, Escalante is not identified as having the speech patterns and other distinguishing ethnic characteristics of Bolivians. Bolivians and Mexican-Americans are represented as being the same type of Hispanic, highlighting yet again the process of Hispanic homogenization in Hollywood. The Bolivian teacher has adopted the same speech patterns, lexicon, and exhibits similar phenotypic traits as his Mexican-American students. Even though he is from La Paz, Bolivia, and his students are of Mexican-American descent, they speak the same dialect in

Spanish, which adds a hint of artificiality to the illustration of Mexican-Americanness in *Stand and Deliver*.

Different Spanish language varieties exist within various Mexican-American communities, and different dialects within the country of Bolivia take on their own characteristics. Jaime Escalante, a person of Bolivian descent, is portrayed in *Stand and Deliver* as exhibiting the same speech patterns as his Mexican-American students. What ends up happening is a homogenization of the Spanish language in the biographical film. In other words, the Spanish language becomes devoid of dialectical differences in *Stand and Deliver.* He and his students speak similar Spanish in such a way that Escalante's Spanish language variety does not differ from that of his students'. Even without delving into a study of Bolivian Spanish versus Mexican-American Spanish, it is evident that actor Edward James Olmos speaks his Mexican-American variety of Spanish. Bolivian Spanish has its own varieties and vocabulary words that distinguish it from other varieties, but his Spanish is not "performed" as being of Bolivian derivation.

Jaime Escalante is shown speaking Spanish to regularly connect with students, most of whom speak the language at home. When revealing his key to success, he responds that the secret is the Spanish word "ganas." This translates roughly to the English word "desire."

Like in *La Bamba*, the other biopic from the 1980s in this study, ethnic heritage was an important theme cinematically depicted in the 1980s. Escalante is depicted as instilling a sense of ethnic pride in his students during one of his class lectures. According to Astrid Haas, "In order to claim Latina/o social agency in the United States...Latina/o films have to emphasize the compatibility of *Latinidad* with Euro-American culture, a goal they attain by showing how their Latina/o protagonists overcome an 'un-American' mentality and demonstrate their adherence to

mainstream values" (9). In one scene of the movie, Escalante educates his pupils about their pre-Columbian background. As has previously been mentioned in this study, he says, "Did you know that neither the Greeks nor the Romans were capable of using the concept of zero? It was your ancestors, the Mayans, who first contemplated the zero. The absence of value. True story. You *burros* have math in your blood (17:02-17:08)." By helping them acknowledge and take pride in the success of tcestors, he inspires them to believe in their own intellectual capabilities. His reference to the Mayans as being the originators of the absence of value rather than the Greeks or the Romans shows a deviation from a historical narrative typically focused on a Euro-American background in U.S. schools. By situating their history in Mexico, he focuses on the uniqueness of their Mexican-American roots. This is a crucial step for Jaime Escalante to take in inculcating his students with a sense of ethnic commonality and pride. Their differences in heritage from a European-American background, then, do not make them as disempowered as their educational system and distorted Hollywoodized images would have them believe. It makes them unique with their own non-European ethnic background and calls for a reexamination of American cultural history. George Lipsitz states, "Embracing a Mexican-American identity offered them innumerable opportunities to... transform the fetters that contained them into weapons of emancipation and liberation" (407). Escalante not only offers a historical reinterpretation, but he also helps his students realize the role that an education can play in freeing them from the bondage of an underprivileged background.

The topic of Latina/os in the educational system has been widely-debated for decades. *Stand and Deliver* (1988) was the first biographical film that showed Mexican-Americans in an educational setting. Edward James Olmos, a prominent Mexican-American actor, was nominated for a Golden Globe for his role as Jaime Escalante. Garnering $14 million

dollars at the box office, the film brought widespread public awareness to educational inequity faced by Mexican-Americans in schools.

The educational system in the United States has played a prominent role in Latina/o identity formation. Most states from the beginning of the twentieth century to the 1960s recognized English as the "exclusive and official language of instruction" (Macías/MacDonald 172). Mexican-American students residing in the Southwestern region of the U.S., which includes western Colorado, Texas, California, Nevada, Arizona, Utah, and New Mexico as per the terms of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo that have been previously mentioned in this study, were often punished for speaking Spanish in school settings. This helped to promote the misconception that students from Spanish-speaking backgrounds were underachieving. Due to an increase of Cuban immigrants during the Cuban revolution of 1959, Florida school districts implemented bilingual education programs, paving the way for other states to do the same.

Rather than providing validation for their cultural and linguistic background, educators used the fact that Mexican-Americans did not speak fluent English against them. Carlos Blanton writes about the history of bilingual education in Texas, explaining how English-Only was a way to segregate and dehumanize young Tejanos (80). This type of discrimination was not only particular to Texas, but it also existed in other Southwestern states.

There was a resurgence of nativism in the 1980s and thus more of a trend toward English-Only in schools. Nativism, an intense opposition to immigrants, correlated with the right-wing politics of the Reagan Era from 1981 to 1989. As a result, bilingual education was once again undervalued, creating a schism in perceived Mexican-American identity and culture.

This historical context is important because it shows that the "based on a true story" situation in *Stand and Deliver* is a product of the complicated history of education in the United

States, driving Mexican-American identity formation. This history drives their identity formation as Mexican-Americans in the United States. The students at Garfield High School are in an educational environment that incorporates a one size fits all approach, not taking into account their unique linguistic and cultural differences. The following quote from the 1996 President's Advisory Commission on Educational Excellence illustrates this oppressive stance:

> The education of Hispanic Americans is rooted in a refusal to accept, to recognize, and to value the central role of Hispanics in the past, present, and future of this nation. The education of Hispanic Americans is characterized by a history of neglect, oppression, and periods of wanton denial of opportunity. (Quoted in MacDonald/Nilles 15; cf. also García 188-89)

Stand and Deliver illustrates the importance of Mexican-Americans in Americana rather than oppressing this ethnicity. Disregarding their history does not take their ethnic distinctiveness into account.

Stand and Deliver becomes a repository of Hispanic stereotypes, offering misrecognitions of Mexican-Americans throughout the biographical film. These incorrect perceptions of Mexican-Americanness have erroneously become perceived as authentic representations of ethnic identity. Numerous artificial depictions of Mexican-Americans appear throughout the course of the film. To illustrate, the Latin lover trope appears in one of the math lesson scenes. Escalante's students read the following in unison: "Juan has five times as many girlfriends as Pedro. Carlos has one girlfriend less than Pedro. If the total number of girlfriends between them is 20, how many girlfriends does each gigolo have?" A gigolo, which I define as a male escort, is another instance of the Mexican-American male depicted as being overly-sexualized. In other scenes, Tito is depicted as a Latin lover, with three female suitors doting on

him outside Garfield High School. After Escalante walks past him, the three females depart, and he facetiously asks, "You're in love, huh? Which one? Let me know." *(Stand and Deliver)*

Another way that Hispanic stereotypes appear is through the violent depiction of Escalante's students. They are shown as having a propensity toward violence, constantly engaging in schoolyard fights. As has been previously mentioned in this study, the depiction of the Mexican-American as barbaric traces back to the image of Mexican bandits who invaded the countryside and disrupted the peace during the Mexican Revolution. In *Stand and Deliver*, Angel exhibits the bandit trope as a modern-day *cholo* as a member of the Maravilla gang. He participates in gang activities and attempts to hide his aptitude for math around his cronies. In one scene when he returns to the classroom, Angel tells his teacher to watch his back in slang Spanish. Chuco is another character in the biopic who initially appears to be combative, gazing at his teacher in a threatening manner and even flipping him off when he is asked if knows the times' table. He responds that he knows "the 1s, the 2s, the 3s" (*Stand and Deliver*, 11:04-11:08), indicating this with his thumb for 1, index finger for 2, and middle finger for 3, respectively. Such attempts at portraying genuine Mexican-Americanness accomplish the contrary: they reinforce inaccurate, clichéd cultural impressions.

Angel, a Mexican-American gangster, is portrayed yet again by Lou Diamond Phillips, an actor of Filipino and Native American descent. Having made his mark in film as the protagonist in *La Bamba*, he was the honorary Hispanic of choice for *Stand and Deliver*, which was released one year later.

Continuing with the topic of how Mexican-Americans are stereotyped in *Stand and Deliver*, expectations of Mexican-American women appear throughout the film as well. In one

scene, Claudia explains to her daughter that "boys don't like it when girls are too smart." Her daughter responds that she wants to take calculus and succeed so that she can be independent.

Of all the students sketched in the film, only Ana Delgado's portrayal is based on an actual person, Leticia Rodriguez. In the biopic, Mr. Escalante, affectionately called Kimo by his students, speaks with her father after he attempts to remove her from school. In a cultural landscape where Latina women have been reduced to the typical stereotypes of mistresses or supporting roles, Ana Delgado is presented as a highly intelligent Latina in *Stand and Deliver*. Her alternative portrayal of womanhood challenges the traditional roles of Latinas as lacking in intellect or being submissive. Rather than being depicted in culturally constricting forms, Ana reconfigures womanhood by realizing the utility of an education in her life with the end goal of achieving autonomy in her life.

When Jaime visits Ana's father in the Delgado family restaurant, he vocalizes a stereotype about Latina women after Jaime Escalante urges him to discourage his daughter from dropping out of high school. He fully expects his daughter to get pregnant soon, so he does not expect her to finish high school or pursue higher education. Ana's father is shown as exhibiting a traditional viewpoint that places the woman in a completely submissive arena.

The following quote highlights this exchange between Jaime Escalante and Mr. Delgado:

JAIME ESCALANTE: You should get another waitress.

Ana's father laughs.

JAIME ESCALANTE: Ana can be the first one in your family to graduate from high school, go to college

MR. DELGADO: Thank you for your concern. Her mother works here, her sisters, her brothers. This is a family business. She's needed.

JAIME ESCALANTE: Well, she could help the family more by getting an education.

MR. DELGADO: Naw. [She'd] probably get pregnant, she probably wouldn't finish college.

JAIME ESCALANTE: She talks about going to medical school.

MR. DELGADO: No, I don't think so.

JAIME ESCALANTE: She should make her own choices.

MR. DELGADO: Un momento. Yo soy el padre de la niña. No usted.

JAIME ESCALANTE: She'll just get fat. She'll waste her life away in a restaurant. She's top kid. (*Stand and Deliver,* 31:29-32:27)

Even though the cinematic Jaime Escalante weaves Spanish words into his lectures, the real Jaime Escalante was not a proponent of bilingual education, so, from my speculation, he did not likely appear as bilingual friendly as Hollywood has depicted him. However, crafting his image as such appeals to the sentimentality of a Hispanic spectatorship. During the 1980s an effort was made to give visibility to Hispanics in Hollywood because of this growing segment of the population. Before that, as a result of the Nixon Administration (1969-1974), the term "Hispanic" was created in order to account for people of Latin American and Spanish descent. This government-created pan-ethnic term resulted in a homogenization of Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, Cubans, not taking into account the diversity of their respective communities.

Jaime Escalante, the Bolivian-born math instructor, counters negative stereotypical Latina/o depictions by embodying the image of a Latina/o who has achieved success in a system that has been traditionally antagonistic toward Latina/os. In other words, he is the Latino who succeeds and demonstrates to his Mexican-American students that they can fulfill their potential.

The *Stand and Deliver* biopic shows how Mexican-Americans must fight against systemic racism and find a way to overcome the colonization of their psyches. In the scene where the principal discusses the possibility of Garfield High School losing its accreditation in California, the chair of the math department tries to justify the shortcomings of the educational institution by stating, "You can't teach logarithms to idiots. These kids come to us with barely a seventh-grade education" (*Stand and Deliver,* 19:09-19:13). Her perceptions of the students reveal a belief that Mexican-American students are poorly-prepared in academic settings.

After Angel arrives late for a third and final time, Mr. Escalante asks him to leave and change his schedule. Angel becomes enraged and demonstrates a keen awareness of the misconceptions that society holds toward Hispanics: "Why don't you put them in college, huh? So dumb taco vendors like me can pick their vegetables for them, collect their garbage, clip their poodles' toenails?" (29:30-29:45). This quote shows that Angel understands the racialization of Mexican-Americans that occurs in the Southwest. Camilla Fojas in *Border Bandits: Hollywood on the Southern Frontier* states,

> The borderizing psyche of the United States is as relentless as it is enduring; there is no fantasy, no dream, and no image beyond its colonizing reach. The border is part of an 'American' lived experience, but it is part of a wide range of fantasies and ideas about U.S. national identity that destroy and divide psyches. (180)

In other words, Angel must combat an entire national identity that holds low expectations of him. Not only has the Southwest been colonized from a geopolitical standpoint, but so have its inhabitants. Those in power perceive the "conquered" people as second-rate citizens. Angel represents the conquered inhabitant who must somehow fight a system that does expect him nor want to allow him to succeed.

Through its use of language, *Spare Parts* reveals the complicated nature of the Mexican-American identity and how it has become hyphenated from a linguistic perspective. For example, Oscar Vásquez represents the heritage speaker of the Southwest. A heritage speaker, as defined by Guadalupe Valdés, is a person who has been "raised in a home where a non-English language is spoken…speak or at least understand the language, and [are] to some degree bilingual in that language and in English" (38). In various scenes throughout the biopic, Vásquez's mother converses with her son in Spanish, and he responds to her in English. He does not express an ability to speak Spanish but he understands everything that his mother says to him. The following is one example of this occurrence:

MRS. VASQUEZ: Hola, mijo. ¿Te dejaron enlistar?

OSCAR: They're gonna have to double-check, so, uh, it may take a little bit longer to process the papers.

MRS. VASQUEZ: ¿Pero ya está todo listo? Oscar, ven. Cuéntame. Mírame. ¿Ya está todo listo?

OSCAR: Mmhmm. (*Spare Parts*, 6:07-6:38)

Mexican-Americanness is also performed through the use of code-switching as a defining characteristic of the U.S. Southwest. Code-switching, the practice of alternating between one language and another, appears frequently in the biographical films examined in this study. In the Southwestern region of the United States, code-switching has emerged as a third, intermediary language. Gloria Anzaldúa explains that Spanish speakers residing in the Southwest have been exposed to both languages and so they must create their own third language (77.). Code-switching, then, is the natural outcome of a community constantly straddling the line between two cultures and two languages, forever coexisting in the linguistic borderland that separates

English and Spanish. The following are instances in which code-switching appears in the biopics of this study:

MRS. VALENZUELA: Ricardo Valenzuela *y su* flying guitar. (*La Bamba*, 35:16)

MRS. VALENZUELA: A fine pair of *sinvergüenzas. (La Bamba, 1:10:14)*

SELENA: *Me siento muy* excited. (*Selena*, 1:04:40-1:04:46)

JAIME ESCALANTE: You *burros* have math in your blood. (*Stand and Deliver*, 17:08)

STORE OWNER: *¡Órale!* Champions! *¡Campeones! (McFarland, USA,* 2:00:19-2:00:22)

LORENZO: Hey! *Tú crees que…*I'm sitting right here! (*Spare Parts*, 25:11-25:14)

As is evident from these examples, Mexican-Americans residing in the Southwest have created a "third language" that is the result of two languages coming into contact with one another. These scenes contribute to the authenticity of Mexican-Americanness by taking into account the unique linguistic backgrounds of this demographic.

Conclusion

As this chapter has shown, *McFarland, USA* offers a revealing glimpse into the segment of crop laborers in the Southwest while *Spare Parts* demonstrates the plight of the undocumented population. These biopics reinvent traditional Latina/o tropes by showing recrafted images of Latina/os in these films – prolific athletes in the former biopic and high-achieving intellectuals in the latter biopic.

After an analysis of biopics from 2015, this chapter presents *Stand and Deliver (1988)* non-chronologically to show the differing depictions of Mexican-Americanness pre- and post-September 11.

Before the terrorist attacks against the United States, the focus on Mexican-Americanness centered more on reclaiming a lost ethnic heritage. As a result of the xenophobia apparent in the United States after September 11, the sketch of Latina/os began to shift, showing themes in film that had never been explored, namely undocumented migration and the harsh conditions faced by crop laborers. In sum, interrelated factors in the United States, such as demographics and political trends, merge in order to influence the ways that Latina/os are sketched in biopics. As the population of Mexican-Americans increases in the United States, this population inevitably changes the demographics of a country known as the "melting pot" of cultures.

The versions of *Latinidad* that appeared in biographical films prior to 9/11 differed from its manifestations after this seminal date in which all types of immigration became perceived as terroristic. For example, in *Stand and Deliver*, there is no politically-charged agenda from the perspective of the filmmakers. However, in *Spare Parts* after 9/11, Latina/os were sketched in such a way that took into account the identity politics of contemporary immigration. To conclude, there is a rift between the films prior and after this important date in history.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSIONS

This study, through an in-depth examination of six Latino-centric biographical films, concludes that the film industry's depiction of Mexican-American identity on the silver screen has undergone a representational shift from the 1980s to the 2010s. Mexican-Americans, the largest Latina/o subpopulation residing in the United States, were confined to limited representations in the 1980s biographical films *La Bamba* (1987) and *Stand and Deliver* (1988). More broad representation of Mexican-Americans emerged in the 1990s with *Selena* (1997) and this representation has become more diversified in more recent years, as evidenced by Mexican-American representation in *Cesar Chavez* (2014), *McFarland, USA*, (2015) and *Spare Parts* (2015). As a result of depictions of Latina/o identity in the early films of my study, media representations have conveyed a misguided perspective of Latina/o, erasing elements of their diversity in the process. While biopics of the 1980s reiterate traditional Latina/o cinematic sketches of the gangster and Latin lover, biographical films of the 2010s disrupt this narrative by presenting the lives of Mexican-American cross-country state champions, a migrant rights activist, and national robotics champions. *Latinidad*, thus, has become meaningless in critical function, yet this phenomenon has played a role in producing more "human" Latina/os in film.

In the 2010s, more diverse Latina/o sketches have appeared, shifting the traditional Latina/o paradigm. This new paradigm of Mexican-Americanness echoes current political and social events in a much more heightened way than Mexican-Americanness in the 1980s and the 1990s. To illustrate, *Spare Parts* shows Mexican-Americans succeeding academically on a national level in spite of the criminalization they encounter in Arizona due to Senate Bill 1070,

which allows law enforcement officials to check the legal status of immigrants in Arizona. *McFarland, USA,* is the first biopic in Hollywood to showcase the athletic accomplishments of Mexican-American athletes in the United States while also revealing the daily struggles of crop-workers.

Because of its mass consumption, popular culture plays an immense role in shaping the public's perception of minorities. An examination of Mexican-American sketches in a film genre based on real-life events is pivotal to any discussion of Latina/o image crafting. While Latina/os have been portrayed stereotypically, contemporary biographical films offer an alternate narrative of what it means to be Latina/o in the United States.

The first chapter examines the origins of Latina/o stereotypes in Hollywood and how these images have prevailed in popular culture. This chapter outlines the origins of the traditional Latina/o images of the bandit, the male buffoon, the Latin lover, the dark lady, the harlot, and the female clown. Furthermore, an analysis of how these images have appeared in animated features, movies, and silent films is offered. This chapter examines stereotypical trends in a cross-genre setting in order to provide a deeper understanding of these Latina/o images in biographical films.

The second chapter shows Latinidad as it has appeared in the musical Mexican-American biopics of *La Bamba* and *Selena.* During this decade, Latina/os were shown in stereotypical ways but with an emphasis on reclaiming a lost heritage. In *La Bamba*, an assimilationist style of Mexican-Americanness is proposed as an element for mainstream success in the United States. In *Selena,* on the other hand, Mexican-Americanness appears as an ambiguous phenomenon. In other words, her identity appears to mirror a complicated border crossing—of U.S. and Mexican components--with its own historical background and unique lived

experience. These biographical films emphasized unity through ancestral heritage, so Mexican-Americanness performance in both biopics highlights the foundational importance of a shared heritage with a white normative audience in mind.

The third chapter analyzes Mexican-Americanness in *César Chávez.* His mere emergence in a biographical film, simply put, shows that filmmakers recognize the need to show Latina/o lives on the silver screen. Regardless of the authenticity or inauthenticity of his life, one point remains clear: Chávez's life has been given visibility on the silver screen decades after the Chicano Movement. Previously invisible iconic Latina/os are "coming out of the shadows" after having gone unrecognized for such a lengthy period of time.

The fourth chapter uses the pre-September 11 biopic *Stand and Deliver* (1988) to show the difference in Mexican-American representation prior to September 11, comparing and contrasting it to post-September 11 biopics *McFarland, USA*, (2014) and *Spare Parts* (2014). This date is significant in terms of Latina/o image-sketching because immigration as a whole contributed to a collective trauma experienced by people living in the United States, creating new filmic discourses for Latinidad in film after this time period. Whereas *La Bamba* and *Selena* sketch the concept of heritage retention and conformity to a mainstream U.S.-spectatorship and *César Chávez* illustrates the glamorized image of a Mexican-American to appeal to a more Latina/o-centered base, films such as *Spare Parts* and *McFarland, USA*, present Mexican-American 9/11 identity issues as being inextricable from contemporary political issues, namely undocumented migration. After September 11, 2001, when terrorist attacks against the United States were committed by Al-Qaeda Islamic extremists, biographical films about Mexican-Americans began to showcase different aspects of Mexican-American identity in the United States. Instead of focusing on reclaiming a lost history, filmmakers place issues such as

undocumented migration in the spotlight. These issues reflected new developments faced by Mexican-Americans as a result of social change in the United States, specifically due to xenophobia in a post-September 11. After this date, immigrants from all over the world, not just those responsible for the terroristic acts committed against the United States, began to be perceived as a threat. Though this research has focused on filmography, social and cultural history, and questions of cultural authenticity, it would be amiss to ignore this consequences of political actions in the recent past. As a point of reference, *Stand and Deliver* (1988) shows a stark contrast in cinematically sketched Mexican-Americanness before 9/11.

Although the changing trends of cinematic identity formation have reflected shifting Mexican-American social issues in the United States, film industry expectations of audience entertainment continue to distort the image of Latina/os. The end goal of entertaining a U.S.-based spectatorship or a Mexican-American-based spectatorship supersedes an authentic portrayal of Mexican-Americanness. Consequently, Mexican-Americanness is performed in such a way that it usually conforms to the expectations of its spectators. I argue that spectatorship expectations override the importance of reflecting Mexican-American authenticity in biographical films. At times driven by a white mainstream audience while at other times driven by a Latina/o majority audience, the outcome of Mexican-Americanness is largely influenced with entertainment as the end goal of movie-making. As a result, Mexican-American identity can never be performed in a way that it actually appeared in real life because of the factors involved in crafting a cinematic production with the end goal of entertaining an audience. Furthermore, filmmakers exercise creative liberty in depicting a biographical life because of the way the life of a person becomes condensed to a one to two-hour cinematic portrayal.

Rather than defaulting to what has become falsely emblematic of Mexican-Americanness, specific ideas for sketching the diversity of Mexican-Americanness are as follows:

1. Employ a variety of musical genres to convey regionality. For example, incorporate Mexican classical music, electronic music, banda, norteña, cumbia, and tejano.
2. Cast actors with diverse phenotypes. Light skin, dark skin, blonde hair, blue eyes, etc.
3. Train actors to employ a diverse set of speech patterns.
4. Tell the untold stories of Latina/os and giving them visibility in the mainstream.

My study is part of a greater project to enhance public perception of cultural diversity and bring awareness to indirect discrimination of the largest Latina/o group in the United States. This analysis has attempted to provide insight into Latina/o identity in film and the role this plays in paving the way for future portrayals of Latina/os by the North American film industry. Attention needs to be given to the regional differences of Latina/os rather than representing them in a way that generalizes them. This can be achieved through films that show reinvented notions of Latina/o identity and skillfully using cinematic elements in such a way that captures Latina/o regional differences.

Research remains to be conducted about non-Mexican-American Latina/o sketches in biographical films. For example, *Hands of Stone* (2016), a biopic about Robert Durán, a Latino of Panamanian descent, who is considered to be one of the most successful professional boxers of all time, would offer more discussions and vantage points for the manifestation of Latinidad in film. Furthermore, with the popularity of online movie-streaming services such as *Netflix* in recent years, Latina/o sketches appear not only in biopics but also in fictional series such as

Narcos and *Devious Maids.* Although this study focuses on biographical films, the phenomenon of Latina/o sketching can also be observed in fictionalized movie-streaming series.

Filmmakers are beginning to understand the diversity of Mexican-Americanness and are better representing the diversity of this phenomenon. Mexican-Americans comprise an integral part of the United States population as consumers and producers of film. As a result, a need exists to not only better represent Mexican-Americanness but to also acknowledge and validate it as a part of the United States cultural fabric. To illustrate, *Bless Me Ultima,* a book written in 1972 by Rudolfo Anaya, was adapted into a film in 2013 and finally a musical in 2018.

Due to a recent resurgence of xenophobia fueled by the current presidential administration, new discourses surrounding Mexican-Americanness are being created and will likely influence the filmic depiction of Mexican-Americans in future biographical films.

FILMOGRAPHY

Entries are in the order as they appear in my study.

1. *La Bamba*

   Luis Valdez, 1987

Production Company	Columbia Pictures
Executive Producer	Stuart Benjamin
Production Manager	Alan C. Blomquist
Screenplay	Luis Valdez
Director of Photography	Adam Greenberg
Editor	Mark Gordon
Art Director	James Terry Welden
Set Director	Rosemary Brandenburg
Costume Design	Yvonne Cervantes
Wardrobe	Sylvia Vega-Vasquez, Yvonne Cervantes
Music	Los Lobos, Miles Goodman, Carlos Santana

108 minutes

CAST

Lou Diamond Phillips	Ritchie Valens
Esai Morales	Bob Morales
Rosanna DeSoto	Connie Valenzuela
Elizabeth Peña	Rosie Morales

Bob Valenzuela, Ritchie's brother, returns to the orange groves of northern California in the summer of 1957 after being away for an unspecified amount of time. Revealing a hefty sum of cash, Bob convinces Connie, his mother, to leave the fields the next day. Rosie, a love interest of Ritchie's whom Bob eyes, accompanies the Valenzuela family as they depart for San Fernando.

Connie resides in a run-down house with Ritchie, and his little sisters. Bob and Rosie livee next door in a trailer. Bob and Ritchie is shown have a tumultuous relationship. Bob is often jealous of his brother's success, showing up inebriated and enraged at one of his performances.

At San Fernando High School, Ritchie sees Donna for the first time and admits to a classmate that he is in love with her. He approaches her in the hallway and walks her to class. The two begin their romance, which is met with opposition by her father because Ritchie is Mexican and from a working-class barrio.

Ritchie begins his musical career, performing at garage parties and in local saloons until he is finally discovered by Bob Keane, the manager of Del-Fi Records, during his performance at the American Legion Hall in Pacoima, California.

As he begins his musical career, Ritchie's relationship with Donna deepens much to the dismay of her parents. They forbid their daughter from continuing to date Ritchie. However, "Donna" becomes a Billboard hit, the two rekindle their relationship.

Throughout, Ritchie has a recurring nightmare about colliding airplanes, foreshadowing the tragic ending of the rock 'n' roll star's life.

2. *Selena*

Gregory Nava, 1997

Production Company	Q-Productions
Executive Producer	Abraham Quintanilla
Production Manager	Dave Wisnievitz
Screenplay	Gregory Nava
Director of Photography	Edward Lachman
Editor	Nancy Richardson
Art Director	Ed Vega
Costume Design	Jessica Pazdernick
Wardrobe	Elisabetta Beraldo
Sound	Dean Beville, Bruce Stubblefield, William Jacobs
Music	Dave Grusin

2 hours 7 minutes

CAST

Selena Quintanilla	Jennifer Lopez
Abraham Quintanilla	Edward James Olmost
Chris Perez	Jon Seda
Rebecca Lee Meza	Young Selena

Abraham Quintanilla and his band members, the Dinos, struggle to achieve success in their youth. The biopic shows the prejudices encountered by his band at different performance halls.

Years later, Abraham marries Marcela, and they have three children. One afternoon, while Selena is outside playing football with her friends, she is mesmerized by her father playing the guitar. After she approaches him, he encourages her to sing "We Belong Together" along with him. He coaches her on the lyrics, she sings, and Abraham is blown away by his daughter's vocal stylings. The opportunity to emphasize the importance of Selena's Mexican-American identity arises in this scene as well. Abraham tells her that she must sing in Spanish so that she can speak to the people in her *corazón.*

Shortly thereafter, Abraham goes to great lengths in order to cultivate his daughter's talent. He enlists the help of her brother A.B. and her sister Suzette as bass player and percussionist, respectively, of *Selena y Los Dinos.*

Selena and her siblings are unsuccessful in their initial performances, but as they reach adolescence, they gain more success. "Como la Flor" becomes a number-one hit on Tejano music charts, Selena wins a Grammy, and begins the process of crossing over as a musical artist.

Selena meets Chris, the guitarist of her band, and a romance quickly blossoms between the two. They decide to elope after Abraham forbids them from seeing each other.

As Selena becomes more successful as a singer, she opens her own boutique. She hires Yolanda Saldivar as the president of her fan club. Later, Yolanda embezzles money from the club, and it is revealed that she murders Selena at a Days Inn Hotel in Corpus Christi.

3. *César Chávez*

Diego Luna, 2014

Production Company	Canana Films
Executive Producer	Gael García Bernal
Production Manager	Aura Santamaría
Screenplay	Keir Pearson
Film Editing	Douglas Crise, Miguel Schverdfinger
Optical Editor	Gus Duron
Art Director	Byron Broadbent
Set Director	Livia Arroyo, Robert Wischhusen-Hayes
Costume Design	María Estela Fernández, Matthew Price
Wardrobe	Tatiana Conde
Sound	Rickley W. Dumm
Music	Michael Brook

1 hour 42 minutes

CAST

César Chávez	Michael Peña
Dolores Huerta	Rosario Dawson
Helen Chávez	America Ferrera
Sheriff Smith	Michael Cudlitz
Jerry Cohen	Wes Bentley

This biopic focuses on the events that transpired in César Chávez's life as a farm worker and activist from the late 1960s and early 1970s. Through the United Farm Workers labor union, Chávez gives visibility to the plight of the farm workers and is able to improve working conditions as the result of various strikes, marches, and peaceful protests.

Chávez, played by Michael Peña, begins the biopic with an interview in which he explains injustices, such as racism and violence, committed against farm workers. He decides to organize over 50,000 of them and fights for more humane working conditions for field laborers in California after he relocates there with his wife and children.

Along with Dolores Huerta, his sister-in-law, they form the United Farm Workers, a labor union for the field laborers. They use nonviolence in order to draw national attention to the inhumane working conditions of farm workers in California. The nonviolent protests included in the biopic are the Delano Grape strike, the Salad Bowl strike, and the 1975 Modesto march. These strikes resulted in a way to collectively bargain for legal rights for farm workers in the United States.

4. *McFarland, USA*

Niki Caro, 2015

Production Company	Walt Disney Co.
Executive Producer	Mario Iscovich, Mary Martin
Production Manager	Margaret Hilliard
Screenplay	Christopher Cleveland
Director of Photography	Adam Arkapaw
Editor	David Coulson
Art Director	Karen Steward
Set Director	Gregory Byrne
Costume Design	Sophie De Rakoff
Wardrobe	Sara Adrian Samish
Sound	Eric Bautista
Music	Antonio Pinto

2 hours 8 mins

CAST

Jim White	Kevin Costner
Danny Díaz	Ramiro Rodriguez
Thomas Valles	Carlos Pratts
Jose Cardenas	Johnny Ortiz
David Díaz	Rafael Martínez

Johnny Samaniego	Héctor Durán
Victor Puentes	Sergio Avelar
Damacio Díaz	Michael Aguero

After his dismissal from a coaching job due to an incident with one of his football players, Jim White is forced to take a job in McFarland, one of the poorest cities in the U.S., in order to support his wife and daughter Once at McFarland High School, a predominantly Hispanic school, Coach White sees cross-country potential in seven of his physical education students. He convinces the principal to let him start McFarland High's first cross-country team. One of his runners, an injured football player named Johnny Samaniego, is enlisted to help recruit six more runners for the team. He convinces Victor, the three Díaz brothers, and José Cardenas to join the team. Coach White recruits Thomas Valles after he gets into an altercation at school. To avoid suspension, he offers him an opportunity to run on his team.

The seven cross-country players hail from crop-picking families. They are shown working in the fields alongside their relatives in order to make ends meet. White quickly bonds with his players and helps them cope with issues at home. In fact, one Saturday morning he helps the Díaz brothers pick produce in the fields.

Although they are unsuccessful in their first cross-country meet at Palo Alto, the McFarland runners train diligently and win the state cross-country championship.

5. *Spare Parts*

Sean McNamara, 2015

Production Company	Brookwell-McNamara Entertainment, Lionsgate
Executive Producer	Lawrence Mattis
Production Manager	Jennifer Booth
Screenplay	Elissa Matsueda
Director of Photography	Richard Wong
Set Director	Susan Magestro
Costume Design	Durinda Wood
Wardrobe	Pilar Agoyo
Sound	Joshua Adeniji
Music	Ray Aldaco

1 hour 27 minutes

CAST

Fredi Cameron	George López
Principal Karen Lowry	Jamie Lee Curtis
Gwen Kolinsky	Marisa Tomei
Oscar Vásquez	Carlos PenaVega
Lorenzo Santillán	José Julián
Luis Aranda	Oscar Gutiérrez

This biopic is based on a true story originally published in the tech-centered magazine *Wired* about undocumented students in Arizona who compete in a robotics competition at the national level. Dr. Cameron secures a job at Carl Hayden Community High School and becomes the head of the science club.

Oscar Vásquez's attempts to join the U.S. Army prove futile because he is undocumented and thus cannot produce proof of citizenship. He hears about the Underwater Robotics Competition, which would offer him the possibility to attend college or land a job, and convinces Dr. Cameron to start a robotics team. He enlists other Hispanics to join the robotics team, including Cristián, Lorenzo, and Héctor. They succeed in creating and designing a robot that earns them first place in a national robotics competition against MIT, the reigning robotics champion.

The Carl Hayden High School team overcomes many obstacles, from a limited budget to lack of parental support. Ultimately, Óscar, Cristián, Lorenzo, and Héctor win the National Robotics competition.

6. *Stand and Deliver*

Ramón Menéndez, 1988

Production Company	American Playhouse
Executive Producer	Lindsay Law
Production Manager	Nancy Richardson
Screenplay	Ramón Menéndez, Tom Musca
Director of Photography	Tom Richmond
Art Director	Milo
Set Director	Sean Carrillo
Costume Design	Kathryn Morrison
Wardrobe	Yvonne Cervantes
Sound	Hamilton Sterling
Music	Ken Johnson

1 hour 43 minutes

CAST

Jaime Escalante	Edward James Olmos
Secretary	Estelle Harris
Cop	Mark Phelan
Raquel Ortega	Virginia Paris
Tito	Eliot
Pancho	Will Gotay

Javier Patrick Baca

This biopic is about the life of Jaime Escalante, a math teacher at James A. Garfield High School in East Los Angeles. He develops a math program designed to prepare his students for the AP Calculus test their senior year.

At first, he encounters resistance from his students and skepticism from his colleagues. As the school year progresses, Escalante wins the trust of his students and helps them to develop strong mathematical skills. Not only does he teach his students critical mathematical concepts, but he also teaches them to take pride in their heritage.

Escalante develops a demanding math program that requires his students to attend in the summer so that they will be ready for the AP Calculus test in the spring. Once the spring semester arrives, the students take the AP test, and most of the students pass it with a four or a five, the highest scores possible on the standardized test. The performance of the students draws scrutiny from the Educational Testing Service, accusing the students of having cheated on the test.

Escalante's students are forced to retake the test, and they all pass yet again with flying colors. The original scores are reinstated, and Escalante continues with a successful math department at Garfield High School.

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